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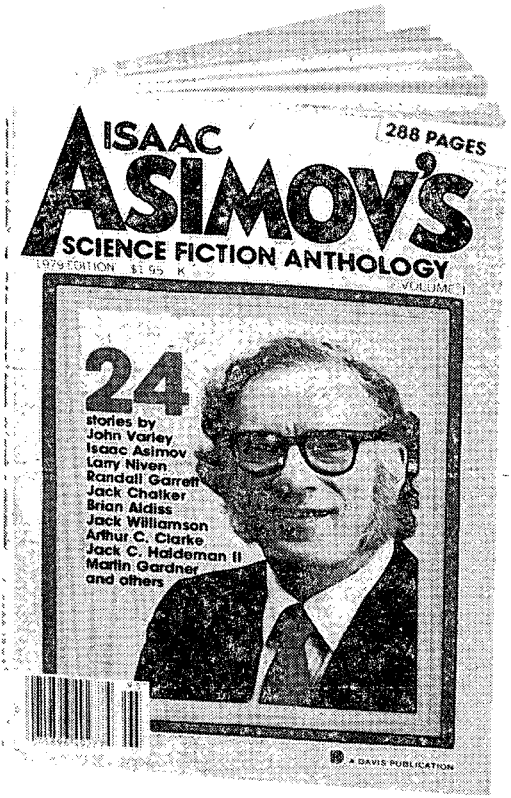


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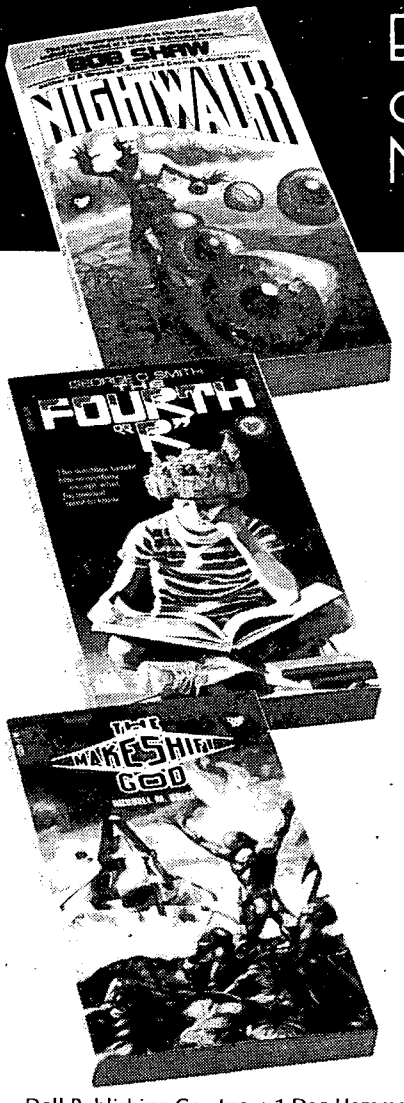


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**POSTMASTER:**
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**Box 1855 GPO, New York, NY 10001**

**ISSN 0162-2188**
**Vol. 3, No. 5 (whole no. 15) May 1979**

**COVER, "THE QUEST"** ..... Jack Gaughan 1
**EDITORIAL: HOLLYWOOD AND I** ..... Isaac Asimov 6
**ON BOOKS** ..... Baird Searles 13
**THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR** ..... Erwin S. Strauss 19
**Against a Crooked Stile** ..... Nancy Kress 20
**How Bagson Bagged a Board Game** ..... Martin Gardner 42
**Through These Portals Dead** ..... Gary Hood 44
**Rainy Monsoon** ..... A. Grimm Richardson 46
**L'Envoi** ..... John M. Ford 47
**Small Talent** ..... Steve Perry 49
**Sanctuary** ..... Jayge Carr 64
**Slush** ..... K. J. Snow 75
**Prime Crime** ..... Milton Rothman 82
**Mermaid's Knell** ..... Anne Lear 106
**The Pinch-Hitters** ..... George Alec Effinger 133
**There are no Wars Words in the Language** ... Anjala E. A. Ehelebe 143
**The Dead of Winter** ..... Kevin O'Donnell, Jr. 144
**Computer Song** ..... Julie Flores 153
**The Quest** ..... Barry B. Longyear 154
**LETTERS** ..... 184

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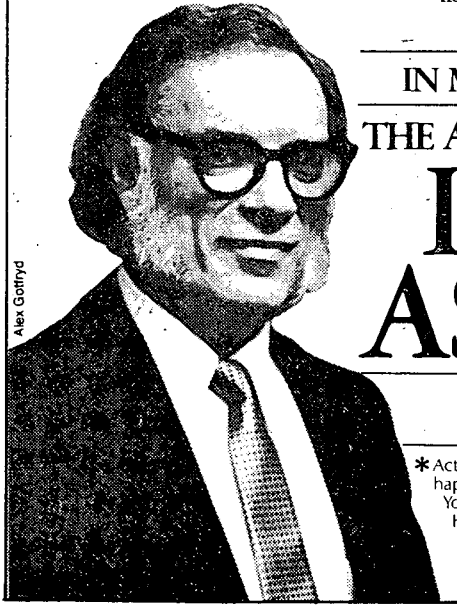
To further mark the occasion, Doubleday has begun reissuing his early, classic science fiction in uniform omnibus editions. THE FAR ENDS OF TIME AND EARTH contains the novels *Pebble in the Sky* and *The End of Eternity*, and the story collection, *Earth is Room Enough*. The second volume, PRISONERS OF THE STARS, contains the novels *The Stars, Like Dust* and *The Currents of Space*, and the collection, *The Martian Way and Other Stories*. Eventually, Doubleday will republish all of Isaac Asimov's fiction.



Alex Gotfryd

IN MEMORY YET GREEN

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

# ISAAC ASIMOV

1920-1954

*Actually, Isaac likes to keep his publishers happy, so he has written *two* "200th books." You'll also find *Opus 200*, published by Houghton Mifflin, at booksellers now.

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# EDITORIAL: HOLLYWOOD & I

**by Isaac Asimov**

**art: Frank Kelly Freas**

I have hitherto firmly resisted the lure of Hollywood. I have refused to write screenplays even when invited to do so, and even when my own stories were in question.

There are two basic reasons for this resistance. First, I am not visual enough to write dialog and events that are to be interpreted primarily in the form of moving images on a screen. I'm just a word man; and though it is a wise person who knows his powers, it is an even wiser person who knows his limitations.

Second, I am reasonably confident that in magazines and books my fiction will appear very much as I have written it. Anything I write for the visual media, however, I am certain will be tampered with by producers, directors, actors, office-boys, and the relatives of any or all of these.

Yet when someone offers to pay me for an *idea*, I am likely to give in. After all, ideas aren't much.

In fact, ideas are so easy to get and are of so little consequence that till now I have never bothered to stipulate for a little on account before I presented one. Instead, I would just write up an idea in fair detail; and, if they didn't want it, they said so and I got nothing. In fact, on three different occasions my ideas have been rejected and I have been paid nothing in consequence.

For instance, a gentleman approached me about a year ago and said he wanted to do a movie about little people trapped in a world of giant creatures. I said it had been done in *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and in the TV series, "Land of the Giants." He said that much better special effects had been developed and that was what counted. He just wanted a routine plot from me that emphasized various dangers the little people had to face and overcome.

I said that if he wanted excellent special effects and a run-of-the-mill idea, he should get crackerjack technicians and a hack writer and I was neither. I offered, however, to think up an unusual idea for him. He was clearly uneasy at this thought, but



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agreed to let me. (After all, I had neglected, as usual, to specify payment, so he had nothing to lose.)

My idea, in essence, was to introduce people landing in a spaceship on an extraterrestrial world of giant creatures and having them run into instant danger. The sympathies of the audience would be certain to be drawn to the little things trying to make it against the overwhelming strength of the enemy.

But, little by little, it was to be borne in on the audience that it was the little creatures who were the extra-terrestrials and that the planet they had landed on was Earth. The little people were determined to make Earth their own, and they were both evil and dangerous. The giants were overwhelmingly the stronger on a one-to-one basis, but they were actually helpless to fight the small creatures as an organized group. Think how helpless we are against flies, considering that they are so small, evasive, and fast-breeding. Imagine what would happen if, in addition, they were as intelligent and as technologically advanced as we were.

I offered to work out the plot in full detail and to give a scientific rationale for how creatures could be as small as insects and yet be intelligent, and the methods by which we would finally defeat these intelligent, insect-like creatures.

The idea wasn't taken up. The gentleman from Hollywood said it would be too expensive to do, but my own feeling was that it was too unfamiliar a notion to fit within the Hollywood cerebrum.

Oh, well, if anyone else wants to use the idea, they can. Ideas are a dime a dozen.

However, please don't write letters lecturing me on my lack of business sense. I won't do it any more.

In fact, guess what? I have suggested an idea which *was* accepted and which *will* be used (if all goes well) for a motion picture. I have signed a contract and I will be paid.

The credits will probably include "From an idea by Isaac Asimov," and I've seen the initial treatment as written by a very competent writer named Peter Beagle. I consider it great, although the producers have forced the introduction of one sub-plot that I don't entirely approve of and that I am trying to disinfect a bit.

I promise to keep you abreast of events in connection with this movie as best I can, considering that these editorials are written several months before they appear in print.

Then, too, I am coming to play still another rôle in connection



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with films: that of scientific consultant.

Till now, I have tended to avoid that, for some of my friends have served as scientific consultants and they have told me that although producers pretend to listen, they don't hear a thing. However—

Surely you all know about "Star Trek," and you know that for several years now there has been talk of a Star Trek movie featuring the various actors who participated in that legendary TV series of a decade ago.

Well, the movie is coming to pass. Gene Roddenberry, who has been one of the writers of the script, had some trouble with the producers over a few points and he suggested they consult me. This they did. They sent me the script of the movie, and I liked it very much.

Along with it were a set of questions and I answered them all, without specifying anything in the way of payment. In this case I couldn't, for Gene is a friend and I don't charge for answering the request of a friend.

There were three gratifying developments, however.

First, my answer happened to concur in almost every particular with Gene's point of view, which pleased him no end and which greatly relieved the producers.

Second, in the few places where I happened to advance small notions that hadn't quite occurred to anyone on the set, they quickly modified the script to include them.

Third, they sent me a contract that included a check, so that I got paid anyway; and, as a result, the credits may include me as scientific consultant.

What gratifies me most is neither the honor nor the money, though neither is to be despised. There is the question of the Star Trek conventions.

Over the last five years or so, about a dozen such conventions have been held in Manhattan. I have attended every single one of them and have spoken at them, signed books, and—in general—participated in my usual jovial way.

Yet I have never been connected with the "Star Trek" television show in any way. I have never written any scripts; I have never suggested any ideas; I have never even been consulted over any point.

I have made this perfectly clear to the people who have organized the conventions, but they have always dismissed it impatiently. I am identified with science fiction and I have an easy



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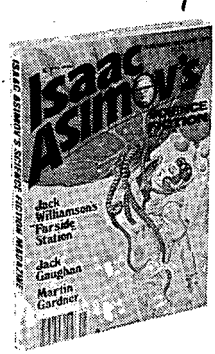


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rapport with the fans and that is all they care about.

Except that now I *am* connected with "Star Trek" and I can attend the conventions without that nagging feeling of being an imposter.

Finally, there is the matter of *I, Robot*. Harlan Ellison's script, which is wonderful, has, predictably, been met with demands for various changes by the producers. Harlan, also predictably, reacted violently to some of the demands. (I had, very early in the game, urged him to be diplomatic; but Harlan is a seething volcano who thinks "diplomatic" refers to someone who has earned a college degree.)

The producers were offended at some of what he said, and for a while the whole project hung in the balance. I wrote a letter to one of them explaining that, although Harlan was a sometimes unbearable genius, the genius part was more important than the unbearable part and that he must be allowed to say his say. It may have helped, for the last news I got was that the project had *not* been called off and that Harlan is working on the revision.

I have my fingers crossed.

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# ON BOOKS
## by Baird Searles

*Because of the press of work on his newsletter of the science fiction field,* Locus *(subscriptions $9.00 for 12 issues, Box 3938, San Francisco CA 94119), Mr. Brown is unable to continue his book reviews in these pages; we will miss him. Our new book reviewer is Mr. Baird Searles; books for review, in galley form where possible, should go to him at the Science Fiction Shop, 56 Eighth Ave., New York NY 10014.*

*Land of Unreason* by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp, Dell Books, $1.75 (paper).
*The Last Unicorn* by Peter Beagle, Gregg Press, $10.00.
*Too Many Magicians* by Randall Garrett, Gregg Press, $12.50.
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*Lords of the Starship* by Mark S. Geston, Gregg Press, $9.50.
*The Trigan Empire,* Hamlyn House, $8.95.
*Galactic Empires 1* edited by Brian Aldiss, Avon Books, $2.25 (paper).
*Galactic Empires 2* edited by Brian Aldiss, Avon Books, $2.25 (paper).
*The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Ballantine Books, $2.95 (paper).

Since this is my first appearance in this spot, perhaps a very brief introduction might be in order. I have been reading fantasy and science fiction since 1945—if you don't count cutting your eye teeth on Burroughs and Baum. I like my fiction exciting and beautiful, whether in concept or style. If both, all the better. I love the works of Samuel R. Delany and Edgar R. Burroughs, Ur-



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sula K. Le Guin and A. Merritt, Tolkien and Heinlein. I believe a critic's pronouncements are just one man's opinion, but preferably an educated opinion. No one person's taste can be an infallible guide to another's.

Shall we get on with it?

L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt are well-known names in the genre. De Camp is best known for his science fiction, Pratt for fantasy. But *de Camp and Pratt* are something else, a third talent entirely. Their most famous dual efforts are those stories about Harold Shea, the "Incomplete Enchanter," that keep turning up in various permutations. Now another work of theirs is available again after a long absence, the classic *Land of Unreason.*

This one, as do most of the others of the collaboration, dates from the days of the dear dead magazine *Unknown,* in which John W. Campbell made an enormous editorial effort to create a school of fantasy as consistently logical as the best SF (and using SF authors to do so). This did not result in anything of Tolkienesque grandeur, but did produce some high-spirited fantastical romps, and a few with a bit more to them than that. Such is *Land of Unreason.*

The hero is a diplomat recuperating at a Yorkshire farmhouse during WW II. The story begins on St. John's Eve, and the superstitious farmer's wife puts out a bowl of milk for the Good Folk. Our diplomat, Fred, feels an urge for some milk, steals what's in the bowl, and substitutes Scotch. The ensuing befuddlement of spirits (of both sorts) results in his being carted off as a changeling, and he wakes in the court of Oberon in Fairyland.

The place is a madhouse. Titania and Oberon are having their usual tiffs about who gets which mortal. Worse than that, everybody's magic is going awry; even the unnatural laws of Fairyland are becoming inconsistent.

This whacko situation makes for some funny moments, but the novel gets deeper and darker as Fred goes on a mission for Oberon to the Kobolds, and it seems eventually that he himself is the key to the whole situation. There is a surprise ending that really comes off, though the astute reader will have picked up a clue very early along.

There are moments of satire here which recall T. H. White's cautionary animal societies from *The Once and Future King,* and moments of great sweetness, as when Fred is transformed into a



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frog and meets a sharp-tongued lady vole with a heart of gold in his pond. For the most part there is a quality of Alice-in-Wonderland surrealism, particularly when the inhabitants of Fairyland get going on logic-chopping and semantics. But the logic of this novel is illogic, the reason for it unreason; somehow it all hangs triumphantly together nonetheless.

For some years Gregg Press has been releasing an interesting series of hard-cover volumes meant primarily for libraries. But since many of these science fiction and fantasy books have appeared only in paperback form before, it is a good opportunity for the individual reader to perhaps obtain a favorite work in durable form.

However, I must confess that I can't imagine some of the choices for publication being *anyone's* favorite. The latest lot is a typically eclectic mishmosh:

Peter Beagle's fantasy, *The Last Unicorn,* which is charming, sweet, and anything but treacle-ly. Who can ever forget the dippy butterfly that appears early in the unicorn's quest?

Randall Garrett's *Too Many Magicians,* the novel-length episode in the series about Lord Darcy, a sleuth in one of those alternate time tracks where magic works. Particularly recommended for fans of both fantasy and mysteries.

Robert A. Heinlein's *I Will Fear No Evil,* generally regarded as his least successful novel (to put it kindly). An aging money-bags type manages to get regeneration by having his brain put in the body of his luscious but dead secretary. But her *personna* is still there, and most of the book is a dialogue between the two, as he adjusts to his femininity. It manages to offend all four sexes, but Heinlein is Heinlein, and it's not dull.

Fritz Leiber's *The Change War,* an original collection of Leiber's stories (as opposed to a collection of original stories), which brings together for the first time all the short fiction associated with the Change War, best known from what may be Leiber's masterpiece, *The Big Time* (also in a Gregg edition). It is particularly good to have available "No Great Magic," a direct sequel to *The Big Time*. There's no way in the world one can explain here the complexities of the Change War that extends across all space and time.

*The Science Fiction Stories of Walter M. Miller, Jr.,* has a self explanatory title. The author of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* had an incredibly small output. This collection contains two short novels



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and 10 short stories, and is limited by contract to 1,000 copies, so all you collectors better hustle.

Walter Tevis's *The Man Who Fell To Earth* has achieved fame, of course, because of the David Bowie film. It is a good example of the mainstream novel using a science fictional device to make a didactic point, in this case, human civilization as viewed by an alien and what it does to him.

Mark Geston's *Lords of the Starship*, or "How to build a seven-mile-long spaceship in two and a half centuries." The facetiousness is really unfair; Geston is a strong and intelligent writer, and this saga of the building of a starship and its aftermath is truly epic.

(It should be noted that the books by Beagle, Heinlein, and Tevis are currently available in paperback editions.)

The interface between science fiction and the comics is an uneasy one, worthy of a Ph.D. thesis at least. I personally believe that science fiction comics bear very nearly the same relationship to the written genre as do science fiction films, that is, mostly imitative. And the reason for this is that nearly all science fictional concepts need words to be put across, usually a lot of words. Therefore the various visual media must wait until those concepts are common coin before using them, which makes them often tedious to the sophisticated SF reader.

However, this doesn't prevent certain works in comic form from being vastly entertaining, either because of their skillful handling of unoriginal ideas or because of outstanding artwork or both. *The Trigan Empire* has both. The pictures are handsome: alive and skillfully portraying the races, monsters, and machines of the planet Elekton. The dialogue and text are neatly integrated and easy to read; you don't have to keep turning the book upside down as with certain recent "novels" in comic form. The narrative is fairly standard stuff, a series of "short stories" about the rise of a tribe of nomads of Elekton from primitive hunters to interplanetary flight, centering on their brave leader and his young nephew. It's Edgar Rice Burroughs slightly updated (and rather directly borrowed from at one point); the pace is fast, the action and coincidence non-stop, and all the villains are "fiendish," not to mention "rascally." Curiously, there is no credit given anywhere in the volume for story or artwork besides a signature on one of the drawings, that of "Don Lawrence." But whoever's responsible, it's fun.



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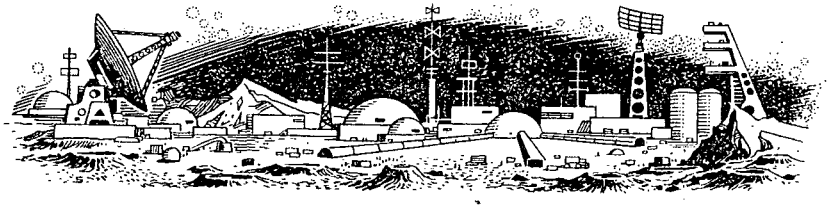
Speaking of empires, do the words "Galactic Empire" still make you perk up and thrill a little? They do me; they still hold the epitome of the glamour, the magic of science fiction dating back to Asimov's *Foundation* and beyond. Brian Aldiss has edited a two-volume anthology devoted to *Galactic Empires,* and how can you resist it? It consists of short stories and excerpts (including, of course, "Foundation"), and the two volumes are divided into three major sections: "Rise and Shine," "Maturity or Bust," and "Decline and Free Fall." Aldiss, with his usual acerbity, starts his introduction with the statement: "Galactic Empires represent the ultimate absurdity in science fiction," but then he allows as how he likes them, too. I think a lot of other people will as well.

It's certainly no secret at this point that *The Silmarillion* of Tolkien is out in paperback. But as one of the older Tolkien addicts around (since 1943), let me just postscript this column with the note that if there is anyone left that hasn't read it, either out of laziness or fear that it won't live up to *The Lord of the Rings,* go to your nearest bookdealer and grab it. It's ravishingly beautiful.



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# THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With the weather warming up, it's getting easier to travel to gatherings of SF writers, artists, and fans. Take a friend to a con(vention) some weekend soon. When writing for information, enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE). Phone 10 AM to 10 PM only, and not collect. State your name and reason for calling. If you can't reach a con, call me at (301) 794-7718. If my machine answers, I'll call back. For a longer, later con list and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE at 10015 Greenbelt Road #101, Seabrook, MD 20801.

**Kubla Khan,** for information, write or phone the convention committee: **647 Devon Dr., Nashville, TN 37220, (615) 832-8402.** May 18-20, 1979.

**BASF-Con, c/o Wynn, 13439 Idlewild Dr., Bowie, MD 20715. (301) 262-4692.** Convention will be held in Washington, DC on May 19.

**ByobCon, c/o Bailey, 4228 Greenwood, Kansas City, MO 69111. (816) 753-2420.** May 25-27.

**Just ImagiCon, 4475 Martha Cole Ln., Memphis, TN 38118. (901) 365-2132.** May 25-27.

**V-Con, Box 48701, Vancouver, BC V7X 1A6 Canada. (604) 263-9969.** Guest of honor: Jack Vance. May 25-27.

**PenultiCon, Box 11545, Denver, CO 80211. (303) 433-9774.** C. J. Cherryh, May 25-28.

**DisClave, 2004 Erie #2, Adelphi, MD 20783. (301) 439-2952.** Convention will be held in Washington, DC with Roger Zelazny on May 26-28.

**MidWestCon, c/o Tabakow, 3953 St. John's Terr., Cincinnati, OH 45236.** June 22-24.

**WesterCon 32, 195 Alhambra #9, San Francisco, CA 94123.** The traditional flagship of West Coast schedule, known for spectacular costumes at its masquerade ball. With Richard Lupoff and Bruce Pelz on July 4-8.

**X-Con, 1743 N Cambridge #301, Milwaukee, WI 53211. (414) 961-2212.** July 6-8.

**Darkover Council, Box 355, Brooklyn, NY 11219. (516) 781-6795.** Convention will be held in New York City with Marion Zimmer Bradley on July 13-15.

**Archon, c/o St. Louis SF Society, Box 15852 Overland Branch, St. Louis, MO 63114. (314) 428-7939.** Joe Haldeman, July 13-15.

**Deep South Con, 1903 Dante, New Orleans, LA 70118. (504) 861-2602.** July 20-22.

**Conebulus, c/o C. G., 619 Stolp Ave., Syracuse, NY 13207. (315) 471-7003.** July 20-22.

**OKon, Box 4229, Tulsa, OK 74104.** Jack Williamson & M. Middleton, July 21-22.

**Fantasy Faire, 1855 West Main, Alhamba, CA 91801. (213) 337-7947.** Convention will be held in Los Angeles, CA on July 27-29.

**SeaCon, Box 428, Latham, NY 12110. (518) 783-7673.** The World SF Convention for 1979, in Brighton (near London), England. Book now before the hotels and cheap flights fill. August 23-27.

*(Continued on page 45)*



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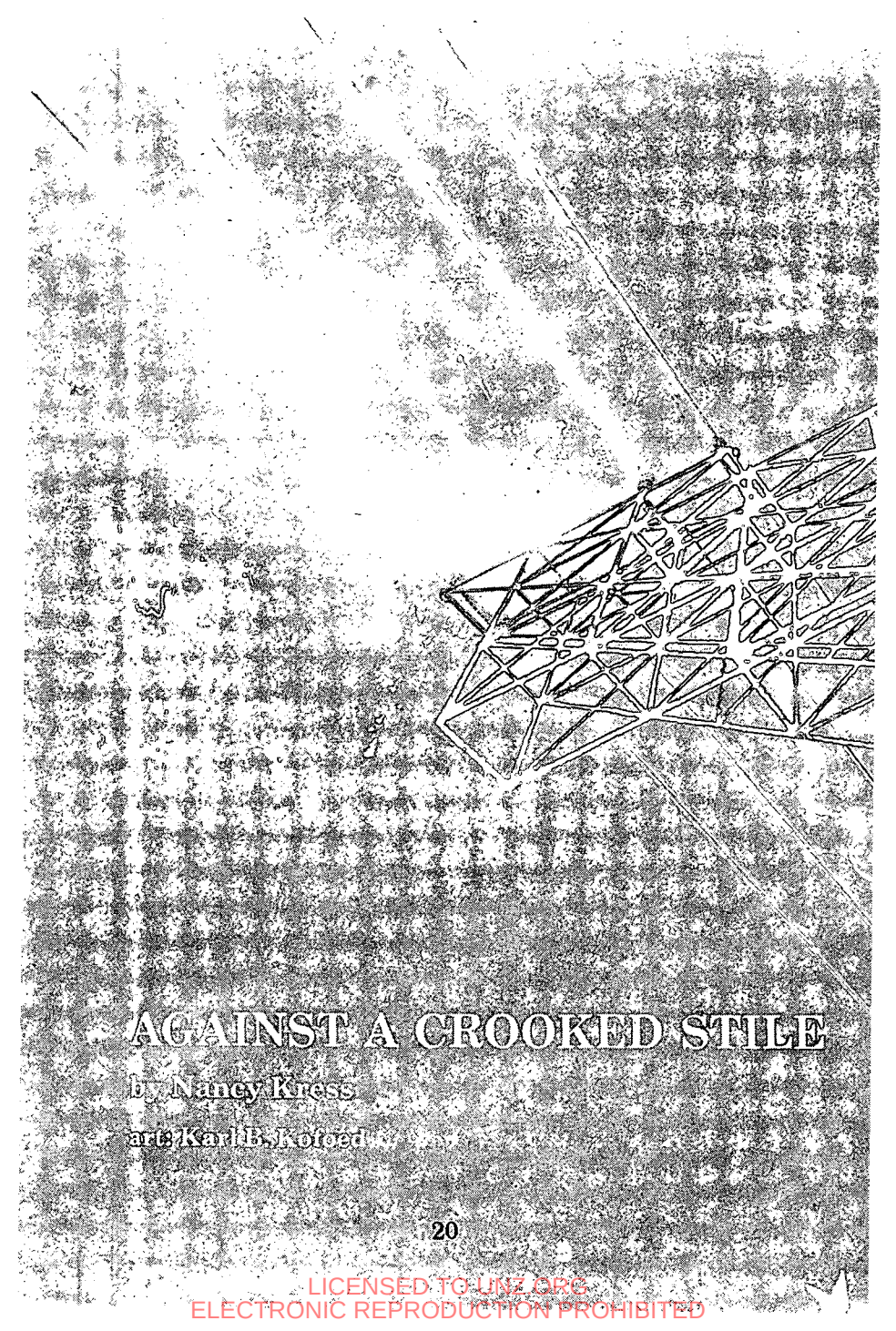

# AGAINST A CROOKED STILE

by Nancy Kress

art: Karl B. Koford



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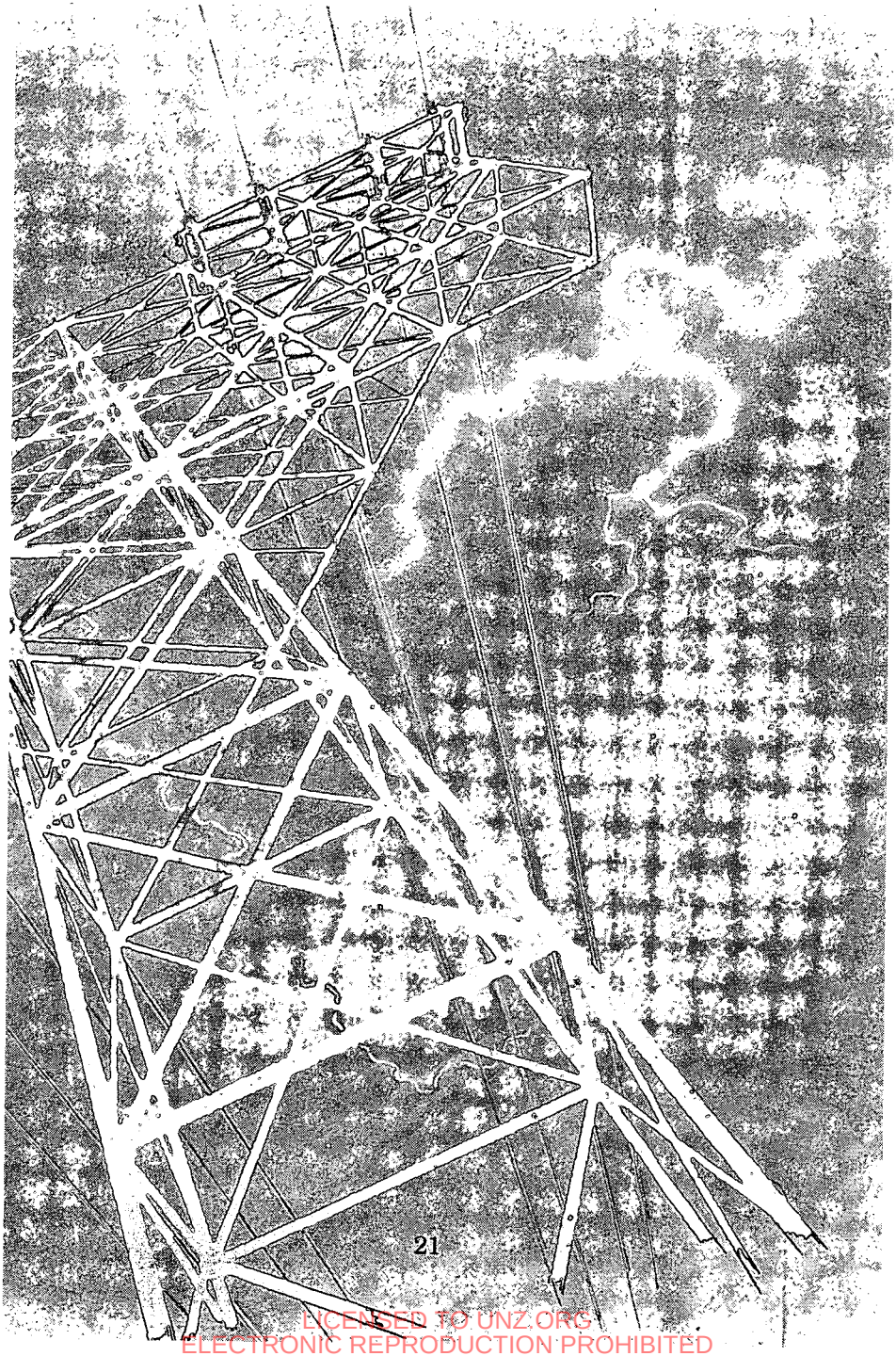



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*Ms. Kress's first appearance in these pages was her "A Delicate Shade of Kipney" in our Jan/Feb 1978 issue.*

Down under the new cast, somewhere near the immobile crook of his elbow, Jorry's arm itched. Surreptitiously he tried to fidget his cramped muscles against the inside of the heavy plaster, but the itchy prickling only grew worse, and the sudden pain that shot through his broken elbow was sharp enough to bring tears to his eyes. Quickly, before his father could notice, Jorry raised his eyes and gazed across the heat-shimmered field, trying to make it look as though the tears had come from staring unblinkingly into the sun. Neither of the two men facing each other in the thigh-deep, uncut hay noticed him.

"Two days," his father growled in his heavy, rusty voice, a voice that scraped across the words like an unused file. Tiny drops of perspiration rolled from the black eyebrows that were joined in a single fierce line, and down onto the bridge of his nose. Jorry took a step backward, away from them both.

"Two days she just sat there, now. Hay only halfways cut, burning up in this sun—who's gonna cut it?" He spat, the spittle sticking to a stalk of hay in a wet glob. "Not me. So you just tell me that, you that's got all the answers—who's gonna get up on that there death trap and cut the hay before the crop's lost for good?"

The power-company man gazed at the tractor squatting in the middle of the field. Sunlight reflected blindingly off the tarnished yellow metal, and he put up one plump, pale hand to shield his eyes. Bits of hay clung to his dark suit where it bulged outward at the waist.

"But I've told you several times, Mr. Whitfield, there's no danger now that we've grounded the machinery and the other—"

"I know what you told me. I heard you." Whitfield spat again and the stranger hopped back a little, glancing down at his shoes. "You come in here and put chains on my barn and my tractor and even on my boy's swing. and that's supposed to fix ev'rything, trade it all out nice and even. It don't, mister. Not by a goddam sight. How'd you like to be the one who—"

"Look, Whitfield," the stranger said. He leaned forward a little,



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and Jorry saw a hard line of bone suddenly jut forward under his soft jowls, as unexpected as the teeth in the pink baby possums Jorry had once found in the woods. The boy almost whimpered, but caught himself: trading silence for not being noticed.

"I've spent all the time here that this situation calls for. Minor shocks such as you experienced are common near 1,000 kV lines; we get 'em all the time. But if conducting objects near the right of way are properly grounded, there's no danger. No one has ever demonstrated—"

"Now see here, you can't—"

"—*ever* demonstrated, I said, harmful effects from exposure to electrostatic fields—"

"I'll sue you bastards for—"

"—of *any* strength; and, believe me, the power company will dismiss your threats of a court suit with nothing more than 'exposure' to trade on as so much nonsense. Have I made our position clear to you? Because I've heard all I intend to!"

Whitfield took a step forward, his fists clenched at his sides. The stranger stood his ground squarely; and suddenly it seemed to Jorry that the man grew as tall and black as the line towers themselves, thrusting darkly 150 feet above the baking field, like menacing giants stalking the sky. In sudden terror Jorry moved to jerk his right arm up to cover his face, but the sling held the cast immobile and pain again tore through the shattered elbow. *Giants—*

"All you're going to hear, eh?" his father was shouting. "You think so? Well, listen a goddamn minute to *that*!" He thrust a trembling arm backward.

Caught off guard, the stranger blinked stupidly in the fierce sunlight before turning and looking over the hay. The scrubby pine at the edge of the field seemed to waver a little in the blanket of heat, but the girders of black metal slicing the sky above it were etched hard and clear. For a moment the two men were still, bent slightly forward, straining to listen. Over the drone of summer insects came a low crackling hum, fitful and unceasing, punctuated with an occasional louder snap that fizzled out slowly. The sound was insistent, edgy, like the mutter of buried embers under a banked fire.

"And that's prett' near 400 feet away," Whitfield said grimly. "You walk closer with a fluorescent light from the bathroom, the bulb lights up. I know. I did it myself." Suddenly he shivered, a quick unexpected spasm shaking his thick body but not rippling



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the stained denim overalls covering it. "And I ain't gonna do it again. You say that's not dangerous?"

"I do," the stranger said. His intent stare had vanished; and now he appeared bored, amused, and impatient. "People are not light bulbs. I'll find my own way back to the car."

A few steps into the uncut hay, however, he stopped, paused, and then turned with obvious reluctance, his plump face annoyed. "Uh . . . just one more thing, Whitfield. You don't wear a pacemaker, do you? From heart surgery? The company is . . . uh . . . advising all residents with the demand-type cardiac pacemakers to remain outside the right of way. Purely as a precautionary measure."

Before Whitfield could answer, the stranger turned again and hurried across the field, the stalks closing behind him with a soft swish. Jorry took another step backward, his eyes too big as he watched his father's face go from red to a dull mottled purple. Jagged red lines sprang out around the nose and mouth. Holding his breath, unable to move, the boy cowered dumbly in the tall hay, waiting

*—the belt falling and he threw up his arms to shield—*

for the moment his father would turn and the fierce blue eyes with their watery, red-lined whites would fall on him, fall on him and then . . .

But Whitfield didn't turn around. He kept staring across the hay at the dwindling black spot that was the power-company man, and slowly his hands curled into fists. Behind him the line crackled in the empty hot sky.

If you lay with your eyes half-closed, Jorry thought, and sort of squinted up the left one, you could make the clouds change shape even faster than the wind could. If you squinted up both eyes, the shapes dissolved and ran together and you could start all over again, make a new world all over again. . . .

Lying on his back with the shoulder-to-knuckle cast propped up on his stomach, breathing in the dry warm smell of the Sandersons' hay, Jorry made shapes out of clouds. The Sanderson farm joined the Whitfields', but was much larger; and in its back field already dense with the second hay crop of the summer, Jorry was seldom disturbed. He had left off the sling because he couldn't figure out how to tie it around his neck with only one hand; the laces on his dirty blue sneakers were untied for the same reason. A grasshopper bounded onto the cast, watched the



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boy from shiny multi-faceted eyes, and leaped off again. Jorry didn't stir.

Small shapes, that's what you wanted—nothing too large, nothing too dangerous. Rabbits, and marbles, and over there one of those fluffy white dogs, the kind that looked like a mop, like old Mrs. Reynolds used to have with all that shaggy hair all over its—

"You're scaring the mice," a voice said above him.

Jorry's eyes flew open and he scrambled to his feet, already backing away, hastily cradling the cast in his good arm. The flapping sneaker laces tangled in the hay and he pitched forward, throwing up his

*—arm to shield his face from the buckle coming down and the smell of whiskey and—*

"Hey," the voice said. "There, I've got you—take it easy, fella. Hey, it's O.K.—I'm not rabid. Really. Haven't been for years."

Caught by his shoulders, Jorry stopped struggling and tried desperately to blink away his panicky tears and get a clear look at his captor. The man wavered, watery at the edges and streaked with blurred silver, then came into focus as the pain in Jorry's elbow subsided and the tears rolled out of his eyes and down his thin cheeks.

The man was wearing jeans, a blue cotton work shirt, and boots—a new hand at the Sandersons', then. But no—the jeans were patched and clean, not whole and dirty, and there were no traces of manure on the boots. So not a farm hand. His leather belt was foreign-looking, intricately worked, with some sort of silver buckle

*—coming down and the smell of whiskey and his own voice screaming just before—*

shaped like the sun.

"Hey, I'm sorry," the man said, releasing Jorry's shoulders. "I didn't mean to scare you. You all right? I just wanted to ask you if you'd mind moving, because you're scaring the mice. That's all."

Jorry wrenched his eyes upward from the buckle, and then it was better. Above an untidy beard were good eyes, warm and young and brown, the color of fresh toast. Some of Jorry's panic ebbed, sliding away in long slow waves; and he sniffed and swiped at his nose with his good hand.

"What mice?"

The man rocked back and squatted on his heels. "Up there—under the line. You're upwind of them, and they smell you. Makes



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'em jumpy. Jumpier."

Jorry craned his neck; he couldn't see over the low ridge swelling with half-grown hay.

"Come on up and look," the man said, and started off in such an off-hand matter that after a moment Jorry found himself following.

Under the line, on the uneven stubble of weeds that had remained after the power company had mowed its right-of-way, was a jumble of equipment. Four large glass boxes, elevated on wooden blocks and screened on two sides with plastic mesh, held piles of shredded newspaper full of burrowing mice. Two of the glass boxes were surrounded by a double shell of parallel wires, one inside the other, which were joined together and anchored firmly into the ground. Squares of metal standing on edge and facing each other in pairs had been placed on the grass, or on high poles. The metal squares had been hooked up to odd-looking meters and to dials that looked to Jorry like plastic warts. Parked over the ridge was a small, sturdy red truck near the remains of a ham sandwich already being carried away by the boldest of a watchful flock of crows. On the warm air rode the nose-wrinkling smell of mice.

"What's that?" Jorry asked, in spite of himself. "Around the mice?"

"Faraday cages," the man said promptly. "Keep the mice in that box from being exposed to the electrostatic field from the line."

Involuntarily Jorry glanced upward. The cable above him stretched like a long black road, a road curving and diminishing over the far horizon. A road for giants . . .

"What about these other mice?"

"They're exposed to the field. The idea is to see if they behave any differently after a long while near the line." Slowly, his brown eyes never leaving Jorry's face, he came around the boxes of mice and held out his hand. "My name's Tom Crowell."

Jorry took a step backward. "You from the power company?"

"No—no, I'm not." He lowered his empty hand. "I work for the Environmental Study Association. We want to see if these new 1,000 kV lines affect the wildlife hereabouts. Want to hold one of the mice, son?"

"I can't," Jorry mumbled, looking down at his untied sneakers. He could feel the back of his neck growing hot. " 'Cause of my arm."

"I broke my arm once," Tom said cheerfully. "Healed clean as a



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whistle. Before the cast came off, I'd collected the autographs of the whole fifth grade." He glanced at Jorry's cast, bare except for a rubbed-in catsup stain. " 'Course, school's out just now. What's your name, son?"

"Jorry."

"Well, Jorry, I've seen you before, walking in the fields. You're about the only kid that *does* come up here. You interested in electronics? Is that why you like it here?"

Jorry kept his eyes fastened on a glass box behind a Faraday cage. Two bright eyes peered out from beneath a pile of shredded Sunday comics. Finally, as though it were an answer, he said, "My pa doesn't like the line."

"And who's your pa?"

"Clayte Whitfield."

"Oh," Tom said. "Oh—yes." He looked at the boy more closely, a sudden sharpness in his brown eyes. "He know you're up here, Jorry?"

Jorry traced a circle on the grass with the toe of his sneaker. "Pa never comes up here." After a long pause he added reluctantly, "He says the line's dangerous."

"Well, he's probably right," Tom said. The boy looked up quickly, his eyes wide with astonishment in his hollowed face.

"There's enough of a field up here to cause all sorts of body currents in a human being and set off God-knows-what trigger phenomenon—especially in the brain organelles. Not to even mention the geophysical effects. Just smell the air—go ahead, move away from the mice and take a deep breath."

Jorry had been going to ask what brain organelles and trigger fins on men were, but instead he obediently moved away from the glass boxes and sniffed. The air smelled faintly acrid, a dry elusive odor that reminded him vaguely of freshly-ironed cotton.

"Ozone," Tom said. "If we get a storm, you watch the line during the thunder, Jorry. It'll glow reddish-blue."

Again Jorry glanced at the huge metal towers. Giants . . .

"But, Mr. Crowell, if—"

"Tom."

"Well—Tom." He stumbled over the name, not used to this freedom. "If you think the line's so dangerous, why are you up here? Why aren't you joined up with the folk who stay away and want the line tore down and write letters and talk about . . ." Jorry trailed off. Talk? Talk was cheap, Pa said, and Jorry had watched while Pa carried in the tightly-sealed box from the



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County Agricultural Agency, the box that was so heavy in the big hands that trembled all the time now except when they held the bottle steady to pour . . .

"Why am I up here?" Tom was saying. "Because I *think* the line's dangerous, but I don't *know.* Do you know where the line comes from, Jorry?"

He shook his head. No one ever said; they just wanted it gone.

"From the lignite coal mines up north. Energy is a valuable thing for everyone, Jorry, although not if the cost is too high in other valuable things. You have to weigh both sides, make the best trade-off. The people here want the line down because it's a scary unknown. But I think it's a better idea to get to *know* it, and then decide. What do you think?"

Jorry shook his head, embarrassed again. That wasn't the sort of thing adults asked him, except in school; and even then they didn't talk to him the way this Tom did. It didn't seem right, somehow. Not fitting. He was only Jorry Whitfield, Clayte Whitfield's kid, and everybody knew the Whitfield farm hadn't had a decent cash crop in three years, couldn't even bring much produce to town to trade anymore. And you had to trade for things, Jorry knew; even this Tom talked about the line as a trade-off. You didn't get things for free. Not hay, not chicken feed, not canned stew, not friendship.

"I got to go," he said abruptly.

"O.K.," Tom said. "But it was nice talking to you. Come back if you feel like it."

Jorry started home without answering. Pa might be back from town, might be looking for him. It was bad to be in the house when Pa came in, but worse not to be.

Moving slowly so his untied shoelaces wouldn't tangle in the hay, the boy trudged through the green stalks, holding the plaster cast close to his body. He took a long oblique route that kept him downwind of the mice.

But he went back, again and again, first hanging around the edges of the mowed stubble, observing as Tom worked and puttered and whistled off-key, then later moving in closer. Each time he came he brought something: a handful of chives from the plant that came up each year behind the barn, some wild strawberries from the hill by the creek, a sharpened pencil in case Tom lost his. Tom accepted these offerings gravely, putting the chives in his sandwich and the pencil in his shirt pocket, so Jorry felt it



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was all right for him to stay. He helped, too, whenever he could. He fed the mice, careful to measure each cupful with painstaking exactness, adding and removing single pellets until he was sure each cage received the same amount. After a while Jorry got used to Tom's talking to him as if they were friends; sometimes he pretended to himself that they were. Jorry seldom said anything, but Tom talked all the time: talk poured out of him as relentlessly as sunshine, as unceasing as the crackle of the line. Jorry, unused to such talk, listened to all of it with cloistered intensity, his head bent forward, watching Tom through the sideways fall of his untrimmed bangs.

"The thing is, Jorry, that electrostatic fields set up currents between different parts of your body. There you are, Jorry Whitfield, a real live wire."

"You, too," Jorry said, astonishing himself. Tom leaped into the air, thrusting out his arms, legs, and tongue in a frenzied parody of every cartoon animal that ever stuck its finger in an electric socket on Saturday morning TV. The mice scuttled for cover.

"So the question is—what do all these currents *do*, coursing through the body beautiful?"

"What?" Jorry asked breathlessly.

Tom shrugged and dropped to the ground. "Dunno. Nobody knows."

Jorry stared at him a fraction of a second before again ducking his head. His hair fell forward over his face.

"We can guess, though. We can guess that it's probably affecting the brain, because brain organelles are most sensitive to voltage differences. And the brain is where perception takes place, where you experience things, so perception's a likely candidate for residual effects. You notice yourself seeing the grass blue, Jorry, or pink?"

Jorry frowned. The grass looked the same as usual to him, a dusty green fading to brown under the hot sun.

"Ah, well," Tom said, "Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was Goodyear Rubber. Did you know that Goodyear—the first Goodyear, I can't think of his name—that he discovered how to vulcanize rubber by accident, while he was cooking some sulphur gunk on the stove? Fact. You just never know what you'll get with science. The whole thing might just as easily have exploded in his face. But it didn't."

Jorry hadn't known. Sometimes it seemed to him that he didn't know anything, hadn't ever thought about anything except how to



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stay out of people's way, until the coming of the line, and Tom. Now at night he lay awake in bed, listening to the shutter that had been banging in the wind for over a year now, and thought about their talks. Each remembered word became a smooth stone to turn over and over, running his thumb over the texture and curves of the surface, squinting at the hidden lines. At such times he always had a picture of Tom standing gigantic against a clear empty sky. In his picture, Tom was still talking.

There was a daily period, however, when they both sat silent and observed the mice for an uninterrupted hour, while Tom made notes in a large black folder. First he removed most of the shredded newspaper, and even the mice behind the wire Faraday cages could be seen clearly. As the weeks slipped by, it seemed to Jorry that the mice were increasingly jumpy and nervous, nipping at each other or fidgeting along the mesh, then dropping into periods of sudden sleep. He wondered what was going on in their brain organelles (he knew, now, what the words meant). Sometimes he touched his own head with one questing finger. It just felt like his head.

The weather turned rainy, a warm, off-again on-again drizzle. Weeds grew lush and green in the vegetable garden, choking the feathery carrots and the string beans straggling up their sagging poles. Jorry tried to fix the bean poles, but the wood was old and rotten, and he couldn't find the key to the storeroom where there may or may not have been fresh lumber. The uncut hay in the back field gave off the pungent smell of decay. As his father spent more and more time in town, Jorry slacked off on his chores, unable to find the needed supplies or equipment. He took care, however, to keep the few animals fed; when the chicken feed ran out, he gave the hens popcorn and Rice Krispies. They seemed to like it just as well.

The reduced chores gave him more time to hunt for things to take to Tom, necessary things, things that would earn him the right to visit the site under the line. He brought fresh eggs—Pa had stopped keeping egg tally—wild sumac for tea, blackberries, an Indian arrowhead, a four-leaf clover ironed between two sheets of waxed paper so it wouldn't shrivel up. Tom made a face when he tasted the sumac tea, but he carefully put the four-leaf clover in his wallet, on top of his health insurance card.

They observed the mice from under a leaky tarp rigged like a lean-to, and Tom shielded his notebook with an old plastic bag



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labeled "Marino's work shirts." Rain dripped off his beard into his coffee cup.

"Ah, well, it's still not as messy as reading chicken entrails," Tom said as he wiped the rain off his thermos before pouring them more coffee. No one else had offered Jorry coffee. "Although sometimes Dame Science seems just as capricious as the rest of that Olympian crew about bestowing her mixed offerings and benedictions. Still, you have to be ready, in case she spreads her wings and get's generous." Jorry looked bewildered and Tom laughed.

"I mean that science gives both benefits, like tractors and medicine and this remarkable-unbreakable-new-improved-temperature-controlled thermos, and also problems, such as the power line. Starting off with a first step, you never really know what you'll end up with. Surprise, folks! A cosmic poker game, new deals hourly, step right in and play!"

"Like Charles Goodyear," Jorry said. Tom stared at him, surprised, and Jorry added in a sudden rush, "I'm gonna be a scientist, too, when I grow up, and discover important things like rubber." He reddened and ducked his head.

"Where'd you learn Goodyear's first name?" Tom asked. Jorry didn't answer. One day when Pa had inexplicably ordered him to ride to town in the truck, and then just as inexplicably forgotten all about him when they got there, Jorry had slunk into the library and read what he could about the vulcanization of rubber, puzzling over the unfamiliar words until footsteps approached and he had fled before any librarian could demand payment in the form of his non-existent library card.

Tom sipped his coffee. "I do hope you get to be a scientist, Jorry," he said gently. "I really do. Tell me—you ever have a dog?"

The boy shook his head and dumped three spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee.

"Well, I did. A black Labrador retriever. Used to show her. I remember talking once to a farmer about a dog that had gone wild, up north this was, and was killing chickens. It might have been part coyote. Anyway, the farmer was determined to shoot it, and took to hanging around the farmhouse with his rifle all loaded; but the dog always slipped by him, time after time. It got to be an obsession with the guy. He took to neglecting his farm, ignoring his family. All sorts of financial and legal tangles developed, about mortgages and such, and then about bad checks



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and diseased stock—and the guy blamed it all on the dog killing those chickens. Just an excuse, of course—and a pretty shoddy one. Some men aren't afraid of anything except their mirrors."

He looked at Jorry with a sudden intensity, his eyes sharp and kind over the red plastic rim of the thermos cup, and Jorry wriggled his feet in embarrassment. Often he had the hazy impression that Tom was trying to tell him something, offer him something, in the same way he offered him the coffee. Why should a grown man be afraid of a mirror?

Just now, however, Jorry had something that needed saying. Carefully he kept his eyes on the generous amount of artificial cream dissolving in swirls in his coffee.

"Tom—there's a meeting. Friday. Today. This afternoon."

"A meeting?"

"Of people who live here." Abruptly he looked up and offered the rest in a rush: "They're all mad. *Real* mad, Tom. They've made up their minds to get this line tore down!"

"And you thought I ought to know about it." Tom's brown eyes warmed with amused affection.

"Yes!"

"Well, Jorry, I'm not sure they're not right. These figures we've been collecting . . ." He dumped out his rain-diluted coffee and poured himself some more from the thermos. "But we won't really know anything until Monday, when the mice go into the lab for testing and mating and dissection."

Tom frowned. "The thing is, the behavior changes in the mice are negative, all right—jumpiness, decreased sexual interest, interrupted sleep patterns: all indicate stress. But they're not *dramatic* changes, not something that makes you sit up and take notice. Not, anyway, if you're on the State Power Commission. Without something more theatrical to offer, any appeal on this line will just get lost in the lobbying. The bureaucratic tendency to not shut the lion's cage till the beastie's loose. Now if the mice had done something really stagy, like grow three-inch fangs or invent espionage warfare . . . well. But I think all our hard work here may end up just another overlooked scientific study, a dull and ineffective witness for the prosecution. And thanks, Jorry, for the information about the meeting, but I already knew about it. Oh, I'm up on all the local gossip. I board at the Sandersons', you know."

Jorry didn't know. He hadn't ever thought about Tom boarding somewhere, eating breakfast, brushing his teeth. Every day Tom



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just *appeared,* like a part of the huge black towers and crackling hum of the line itself. Jorry tried to picture him watching TV with Jeanine Sanderson, who had been in his class at school last year, and a queasy feeling twisted in his stomach. Once he had overheard Mrs. Sanderson tell Jeanine that she "shouldn't play with that Whitfield boy, because with a pa like that, you never knew." The feeling twisted harder. Jorry stood up.

"I got to go."

"You sure . . . it's not your usual time yet. Here—wipe off your cast with the towel. There's coffee on it."

"No!"

"Hey, Jorry—what's wrong?"

"Nothing! I got to go."

"But—"

"I got to go!"

Tom watched him intently. Around the boy's eyes were the beginnings of moist trails streaking the dirt on his thin face.

"Jorry," he said quietly, "Jorry—how did you break your arm?"

The tear trails paled, and the boy made an aborted half-gesture in the direction of throwing up his arm. Then he blinked dully and mumbled, "I fell out of the hay loft."

Tom put an arm around Jorry's shoulders, speaking in a low, serious voice so unlike his usual self that Jorry was startled into listening. "Jorry, you know this is the last day for this project. After I pick up the mice on Monday I won't be back. I don't believe you fell out of the hay loft—no, wait, don't squirm away, listen to me—you're a bright kid, and a damn nice one, and if you stay here . . . Jorry, there are arrangements, laws, for making sure that nothing like that happens to kids. You could leave here, stay with some nice foster family; and I could even visit you on weekends. We could go to a ball game, mess around in my lab. All you have to do is let me take you to Social Services, and then you'll have to be willing to *tell* them—Jorry, wait, listen to me—wait!"

"You're crazy!" Jorry shouted, already backing away. Crazy, crazy, crazy! Tom didn't even need Jorry's information about the meeting—he already had it, already had everything. Let Tom take him away? When Jorry could give Tom nothing but sumac tea he didn't even like, could be worth nothing to Tom, to anyone except Clayte Whitfield, doing farm chores, and even there mostly a useless nuisance—"goddamn nuisance!" his father roared. To be always in the way, always in need, always someone other people's



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children shouldn't play with? To be always with nothing to trade for the impatient charity of strangers who traded taking care of you for money from the Welfare—to live like that? Crazy!

"Go take Jeanine Sanderson to a ball game!" he shouted.

"Hey, Jorry—"

"Just leave me *alone*!" And then he was running, clutching his cast awkwardly against his stomach, running with a lopsided lope over the ridge, through the rain.

By the time Jorry reached home, still running, his elbow ached from bouncing against the inside of the cast. Water streamed onto it from his shoulders and hair; with each heaving breath he smelled soaked plaster mingled with damp earth and the wind-borne smell of wet cows. Leaning against the house, Jorry tried to catch his breath, to stop the silent sobs that shook his whole body, before he pushed open the screen door and went inside.

"Where you been, boy?"

Jorry snapped his head upward. Pa, who should have been in town, should have been still at that meeting, was never in the house at this time anyway—Pa was sitting behind the kitchen table, a glass in his big hand. Over the rain smells came that other smell. A pool of it had spilled on the table and one amber drop slid lazily over the edge, hung suspended for a long second, then plopped softly to the floor. Funny about that plop, Jorry thought crazily—you should hardly be able to hear it over the rain, but it filled the room like thunder.

Slowly he reached behind him for the latch to the screen door.

His father's hand caught him at the shoulder and spun him across the kitchen and into the table. The glass shattered on the floor.

"I asked you where you been!"

"Ou-out, Pa!"

Fighting for balance, Jorry twisted his head and gazed at his father in terror. But Whitfield was nodding, a drunken heavy nod that made his head bounce like a dropped sack of grain.

"Out. You been out, and I know where—you think I don't know where. I know where. I been out, too—out with those namby-pamby bastards who don't give a damn if their farms go to hell on account of some fat-assed power company, 'thout doing a damn thing about it but givin' the farms away!" He nodded over and over, repeating the phrase: "Givin' away. Just givin' away.

"And you know what they're gonna do—what got decided at



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their big angry meeting—they're gonna send a delegation up to the Congressman . . . up to the Congressman, tiptoein' all polite up to the Capitol, where nobody gives a damn anyway—but not me, boy! Not me! *I* know the only way to set the bastards to rights!" He shoved his face close to Jorry's and hissed again, "Not me!" Rheumy yellowish liquid oozed from the corners of his eyes. "What do you say to that, boy?"

"N-no, Pa."

Whitfield laughed loudly, straightened up, and groped behind him for the missing glass. Jorry edged around the table, numbly eyeing his father's face, until his foot struck something hard. Glancing down, he saw the box from the County Agricultural Agency, open now, spilling out the cylinders that could blast out a stubborn stump no tractor could dislodge, could send it spraying wood chips ten feet into the air. One stick of the dynamite lay half-puddled in amber whiskey. A stump, or a rock—or a truck. 'You been out and I know where.'

"Hey!" Whitfield yelled, and snatched at air. Jorry had barreled across the kitchen and through the door, his cast striking the screen with such force that bits of plaster flaked into the dirty mesh. He stumbled as the rain hit him in a solid sheet, but picked himself up and ran, zig-zagging across the barnyard and around the edge of the barn. Behind him he heard the door bang again and then his father's hoarse yell, the words blown away by wind and rain. Jorry leaned against the barn, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before peering around the corner.

His father was lurching across the barnyard.

A sudden, unexpected flash of thunder lit up the sky and to Jorry his father suddenly looked huge, a giant swelling blackly to fill up the world and no place to hide and

*—the buckle coming down and the smell of whiskey and his own voice screaming just before the—*

Giants!

He ran the length of the barn and headed out toward the hayfield, bent low, huddled over the cast. Cutting diagonally through the rotting hay, running until his lungs ached, stopping only to wipe the streaming water from his eyes before running again, until he collapsed, heaving and panting, in the one place his father had never yet come. Sanctuary.

But for how long?

Jorry wrapped his good hand around the bottom girder and convulsively flexed and unflexed his fingers over the wet metal.



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Gradually his breathing slowed and he no longer had to snatch at draughts of wet air. Above him the line crackled and snapped, glowing through the rain with a fuzzy, reddish-blue corona. The line swayed gently, like the smooth surf line of some radioactive sea, but the boy hardly noticed. When he could stand, he began to trudge along the right-of-way, shedding stray bits of hay as he went, and his eyes moved only to jump to the next colossus in the long row of looming black giants safe-guarding his trail.

The truck was gone, and Tom with it.

Only the cages of mice remained. Water slid down the glass sides in smooth, silent trails. The rain had let up, but the sky was darkening, and occasionally thunder drowned out the ceaseless crackle overhead. Jorry stared blankly at the spot where the tarp lean-to had been, and his face twisted sideways.

Gone. Home for the day, home to the Sandersons', home and dry and in no danger at all. Playing checkers with Jeanine and drinking hot coffee and not needing to be warned, not needing anything, because dynamite fuses don't light in the rain and even Pa would remember that. Everyone remembered that, except Jorry. And on Monday Tom would pick up the mice and be gone for good, gone beyond the reaches of Jorry's stupid rescues or bitter tea or anything else he might scrounge up. He wouldn't see Tom again, couldn't see him again, because things didn't work like that. You didn't get things for free, and suddenly he didn't care if Pa blew up every tower on the whole line, one by one, and Jorry himself along with them. He just didn't care.

The boy threw himself down on the damp earth in front of the mice cages and buried his face in his left arm, too spent for tears. The right arm stuck out awkwardly at his side, the cast lying stiff and sodden in the mud.

Gone.

Abruptly, the sky shrieked and cleaved into two blinding halves as a bolt of lightning tore from cloud to cloud. Jorry was hurled back down on his face, the mud tingling below him, while overhead the line flamed red-purple and leaped wildly against its moorings. The crackling mounted to a wailing crescendo, for a confused moment sounding acrid and smelling deafening, and then both sound and smell whirled into a jaundice-colored mist swirling with mice and rain and

*—the belt falling and he threw up his arm to shield—across the field stay low don't—more coffee Jorry there's plenty and put*



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*some sugar in your Olympian offering—his face from the buckle coming down and the smell of ozone you watch the line during a storm Jorry it—body currents and brain organelles and the center of perception of his screaming just before the crack of bone in Jeanine Sanderson's head tingling with the smell of—*

The mist faded into black. The blackness pulsed and then steadied, and out of it slowly emerged the slipperiness of the mud. Jorry raised his head and shook it from side to side, first cautiously and then, when nothing hurt too much, more vigorously. Thunder rumbled somewhere over the horizon, and the eastern sky paled weakly. The boy sat up and swiped at the mud on his face, smearing it into long dark smudges.

The air smelled scorched, like wet laundry under a too hot iron, and mingled over and under and through was another smell, both familiar and unfamiliar, like a dream half-forgotten.

The smell of fear.

Whose?

Jorry wrinkled up his muddy nose and sniffed. It *was* fear and it *was* in his nose, not in his mind or muscles or stomach. As he sniffed he became aware that the elusive smell—how did he know what it was? but he did—had slid down to the back of his throat and become a taste, chalky and metallic.

Wide-eyed, Jorry looked around. A gray mouse was huddled next to the plastic mesh, its whiskers still quivering. Around the matted fur on its wedge-shaped head was a faint red halo.

Instantly Jorry glanced up, but the reddish glow around the line had gone: the cable lay black and inert against the sky. By the time Jorry's eyes swung back to the mouse, the red halo was fading and so was the chalky taste-smell of fear. The mouse uncurled itself, stretched, and wandered along the mesh. From under the sodden newspapers at the back of the cage crept another mouse, smaller and white, with pink ears. The head of the gray mouse began to glow again, this time a flickering marigold yellow, and Jorry breathed in a musky, damp odor that brought no word to his mind but did bring a sudden tightening in his belly muscles and a heaviness in his groin and a confused image of Jeanine Sanderson in her gym shorts.

He hunted up a sharp stick and prodded the gray mouse through the mesh. The marigold yellow flashed into red and again the chalky-metallic smell filled Jorry's nostrils. Slowly he withdrew the stick and gazed at the glass cage, dazed.

Bits and pieces of things Tom had told him vibrated in his head



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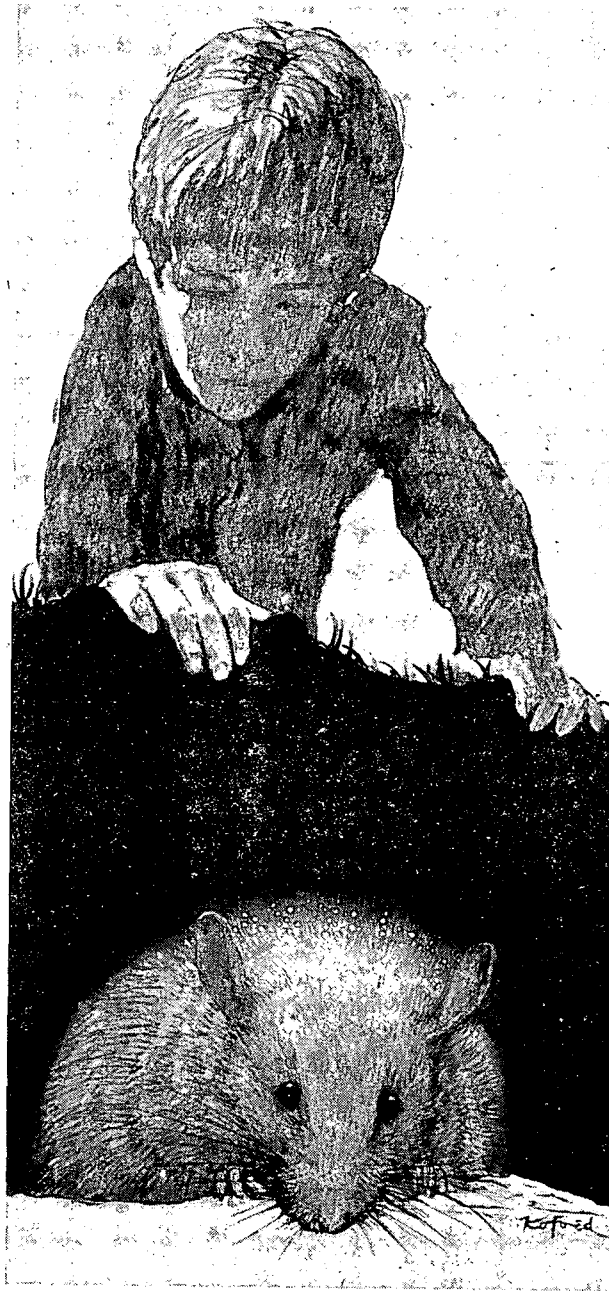



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like struck tuning forks. Brain organelles. Body currents. 'Perception's a likely candidate for change.' Trigger phenomenon. And, incongruously, the smell of coffee.

Was it the mice who were different, giving off their haloes and their emotional smells, or was it something different in *his* brain that made him aware of these things? Jorry put his good hand to his nose and pinched it thoughtfully.

A second later he was scrambling to his feet, his sneakers nearly sliding out from under him in his haste to get to the second cage. It was more difficult to get the stick poked into this one, through the double-wire screening of the Faraday cage and then through the plastic mesh; but he kept at it, his tongue stuck out at the corner of his mouth, until the stick hit something more yielding than glass, less than newspaper. Jorry prodded hard. There was a sudden squeal, and a black mouse head poked out of a pile of shredded editorials. Around the black was a thin halo of red.

*Inside* the Faraday shield.

Rocking back on his heels and wrinkling his muddy nose against the sudden chalky-metallic smell, the boy stared at his stick, then at the black line stretching overhead, and again at the stick. So it *was* a change inside his own head; if the change had been in the mice, the ones within the Faraday shield wouldn't have been affected. What was happening to him?

The fear only lasted a moment, a sickening moment when he wondered crazily if he would see a red halo if he looked in a mirror. A mirror—what had he been told about a mirror? Who had told him? Oh, yes—Tom.

Jorry's grip tightened around his stick. Another feeling swelled within him, swelled like the breaking of river ice after the winter, splintering the momentary fear and spinning it away in the rush of excitement. Whatever this thing was, this thing he could do now, *he* had found it. He, Jorry Whitfield. It was his discovery, his first step, his vulcanized rubber spilling onto the stove, his. Like a real scientist, like Charles Goodyear, like *somebody*.

Like Tom.

And it was important, this thing. Jorry wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did. Important enough, different enough—what had Tom said? 'dramatic'—so those men on the Power Commission would have to listen about the line. Was it good dramatic or bad dramatic? What would those men think about what had happened to him? Jorry didn't know, but he guessed they wouldn't



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like it when he told them what colors *their* halos were.

But even when the line was gone—and here he glanced up at it with something almost like affectionate regret—this thing, this Sense, would still be his. His to keep, his to use, his to give to Tom for that scientific report that now was not going to be dull. And if he 'gave' this Sense to Tom, offering him the use of it the way he would have with a new bicycle if he had ever had one, then for the first time Jorry could, in turn, let himself think about the dizzying possibility Tom had talked about, the possibility of leaving, of not having to lie rigid in his bed listening to Pa downstairs with his bottle and wonder if this time . . . he could leave, now. Now that he had earned the right, now that he had this important thing to trade, to swap—

But what had he traded to earn the Sense?

Slowly Jorry sat down in the mud. He had traded nothing; he was even going to help get the line torn down, if that was possible. So the Sense was free, an unexpected gift, an offering, a benediction. But that wasn't possible: nothing was free, things didn't go right by themselves, nobody gave you anything without trying to get something greater back, it just didn't work like that. It *never* worked like that.

Did it ever work like that?

Sitting on the wet ground, his stick still in his hand, Jorry felt dizzy. An errant drop of water trickled off the back of his collar and down his neck, and he sneezed.

It was difficult fishing the gray mouse out of the cage, using only one hand. When Jorry finally had the damp body clasped around its middle, he squeezed it firmly and started walking over the ridge. At the top he halted abruptly. Far down the line was a dark figure, made tiny by distance, standing motionless in the middle of a wet field of rotting hay. By screwing up his eyes and squinting through the mist, Jorry could just make out the figure of his father, head tilted back to stare upward at the soaring black girders of the line tower. He could make out, too, around the thrown-back head, a thin red halo. On a vagrant puff of wind came the faint smell of chalk.

Jorry blinked and tightened his grip on the mouse until it squealed. His father's arms dangled at his sides, the big hands limp and empty. He was standing well back from the line, well outside the right of way, and the red fear-halo glowed like a blurred mist through the soft rain.

His father? Afraid? His father afraid; small and wet and power-



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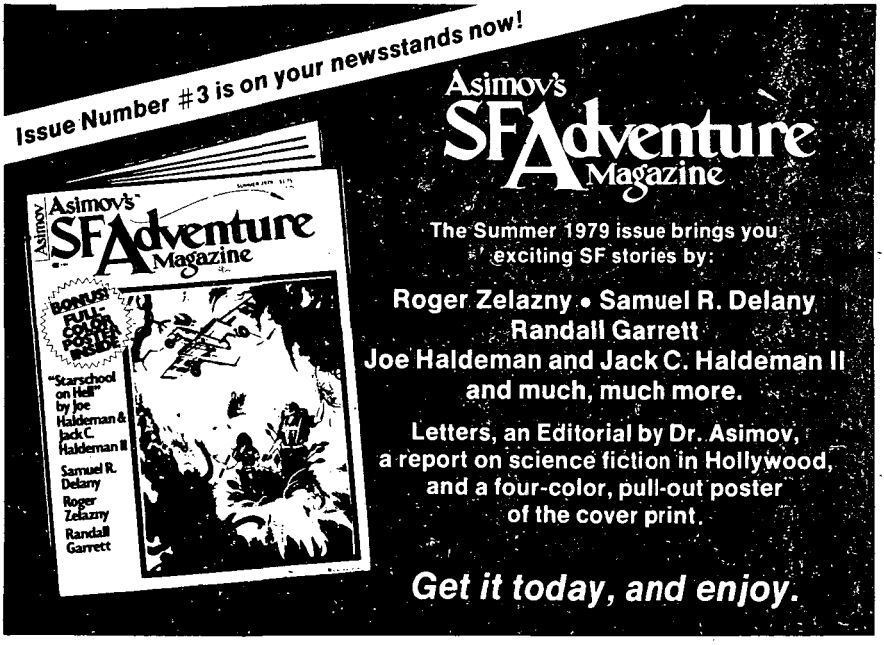
less by the line, and afraid. Clayte Whitfield. Only a man afraid. Of the line, of his mirror, of the scary confusion in things not always turning out badly, in sometimes ending well, or neither, or both.

Jorry gazed for a long time, his face streaked with mud and concentration. Then he blinked again, turned away, and carried his mouse on his cast, riding in front of him like an unexpected gift, an offering, a benediction, over the ridge toward the Sandersons'. His muddy figure loomed tall as a giant against the rainy sky.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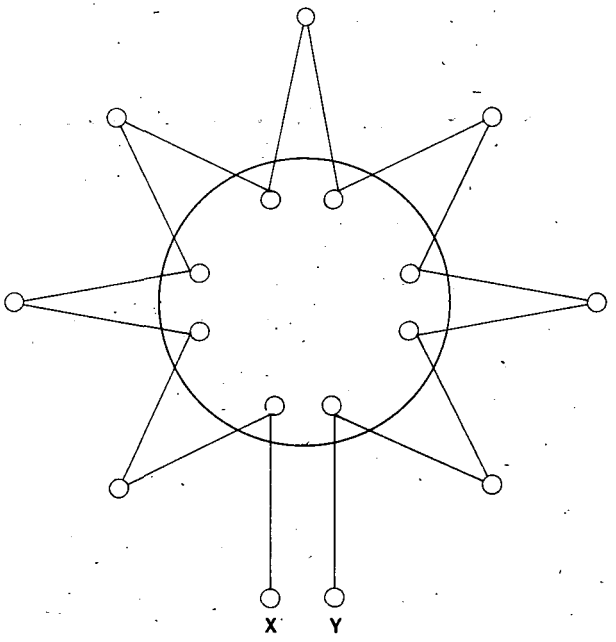
# HOW BAGSON BAGGED A BOARD GAME

## by Martin Gardner

*Mr. Gardner's latest puzzle has no less than three layers of question and solution presented in this issue.*




Sidney Bagson was the twenty-fifth century's world expert on ancient mathematical games. He was delighted when a French archeologist, on a dig in what had once been New Jersey, found an artifact that seemed to be the board of an unknown twentieth-century game. The board's pattern is shown above. Somehow the artifact had survived the terrible world war of the early twenty-first century that had virtually obliterated North America.

Bagson had never seen such a board before. Try as he would, he



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was unable to deduce any reasonable playing rules. There was, however, a way to solve the mystery. The Weizmann Institute of Science, in Rehovot, where Bagson was a mathematician, owned a machine that enabled one to travel back in time and view past events. The machine and the person inside could not interact with the events being viewed. It had long been established that such interactions were impossible because they led to logical contradictions of the kind so thoroughly explored in primitive science fiction.

The Weizmann Institute gave Bagson permission to transport its machine to Secaucus, New Jersey, where the artifact had been unearthed. Extremely precise methods of quark dating established that the board had been made in the fall of 1987.

Bagson climbed into the machine, adjusted the dials, and soon found himself watching a boy and girl playing the game. They were, of course, unaware of his presence. After observing a few dozen games it was easy to deduce the rules:

1. The game begins with a red counter on spot $X$, a blue counter on spot $Y$. Players choose colors, then alternate turns in moving their counter forward along the zigzag line.

2. On each move a player must advance his counter 1, 2, or 3 spots along the line. No jumps are allowed.

3. When the pieces meet—that is, when they are adjacent and no more moves are possible—the player whose piece is *inside* the circle wins.

Bagson at once recognized this as what mathematicians call a "nimlike" game. It cannot end in a draw because when the counters meet, one piece must be inside the circle, the other outside. It follows that the first or second player has a sure win if he or she plays correctly.

Which player can always win, and what strategy must the winner follow? Turn to page 48 for the answer.



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# THROUGH THESE PORTALS DEAD

## by Gary Hood

*Mr. Hood, now 35, migrated from Tennessee to Missouri by way of North and South America back in '64. His job—software analyst for a manufacturer of large-scale computers—interferes a bit with his hobbies: astronomy, weightlifting, and farming. The author also has a wife, a daughter, and a degree in electrical engineering. This is his first sale.*

A uniformed policeman led the sobbing, terrified girl away from the scene, while Sam Dougherty knelt beside the kid's body and gingerly maneuvered a .357 magnum into a plastic bag.

Amos Jones absent-mindedly holstered his own revolver and watched without emotion. Any pity he might have felt for the kid was displaced by a dull, throbbing pain in his chest where the kid had shot him—just to get his point across. His bulletproof vest had stopped the slug, but not the sledge-hammer force of the impact.

Having collected the evidence, Dougherty stood and faced Jones. "Too bad, Amos," he said, pointing a thumb at the corpse, "but we had to consider the hostage."

Jones nodded. "I'm glad you guys got here in time, Sam. The kid had me up a tree. And thanks for crossing the picket line."

Dougherty waved a *you're welcome,* studying the gun through the plastic. "How'd he smuggle in the cannon?"

"Same old story. Someone wrecked the metal detectors, and they keep putting tape over the closed circuit monitors."

"Punks! I'm glad I'm a cop. I wouldn't have your job."

"Sam! They're not *all* like Tommy. Most of them are good kids; they learn their lessons—"

"Sure, except when the security guards go on strike."

Jones sighed. "They *always* pick the worst time—just before final exams."

Dougherty tucked the gun under his arm and removed a small note pad and pencil from his inside pocket. "Well?" he exhaled loudly. "What was it *this* time? On dope? Crazy? Tired of school?"



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Jones shook his head, almost smiling. "No, I'm afraid this is another *first,* Sam. I've been principal of this high school for a long time, but I've never had a case like this." He sighed, then continued. "Tommy flunked—his third time—and couldn't stand the thought of coming back next year. —I tried to tell him that society is fed up with high school graduates who can't read, but he wouldn't listen." He paused, as if in deep thought, muttering, "Just like the others . . . "

Dougherty frowned. "What's so different about that?"

"Well, Tommy wanted to join organized crime, but they wouldn't accept him without a diploma."

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## THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

*(Continued from page 19)*

**NorthAmeriCon, Box 58009, Louisville, KY 40258. (502) 636-5340.** The Continental con, while the WorldCon is abroad. With Fred Pohl, Lester Del Rey, and our own George Scithers; everything the WorldCon has but the Hugos—plus a river cruise. August 30-September 3, 1979.

**PghLANGE, c/o Geraud, 1202 B-T Building, Pittsburgh, PA 15222. (412) 561-3037.** Sept. 28-30.

**MosCon, Box 9141, Moscow, ID 83843.** Robert Heinlein (health permitting), Sept. 28-30.

**NovaCon 9 (West), Box 428, Latham, NY 12110. (518) 783-7673.** Free to UK/Eire nationals, November 2-4.

**PortCon, Box 985, Beaverton, OR 97005,** A low-key "mini-con" in Portland, OR, Nov. 10-11.

**LosCon, c/o Pelz, 15931 Kalisher, Granada Hills, CA 91344. (213) 361-7827.** Los Angeles, CA, Nov. 10-12.

**Future Party, 606 Alpine Vlge., East Greenbush, NY 12061. (518) 477-4320.** In Albany, NY on Nov. 22-25.

**NutriaCon, 6221 Wadsworth, New Orleans, LA 70122. (504) 283-4833.** Nov. 30-Dec. 2, 1979.

**NorEasCon II, Box 46, MIT Station, Cambridge, MA 02139.** The World SF Convention for 1980, with Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, and Bruce Pelz, in Boston, MA on August 29-September 1, 1980.



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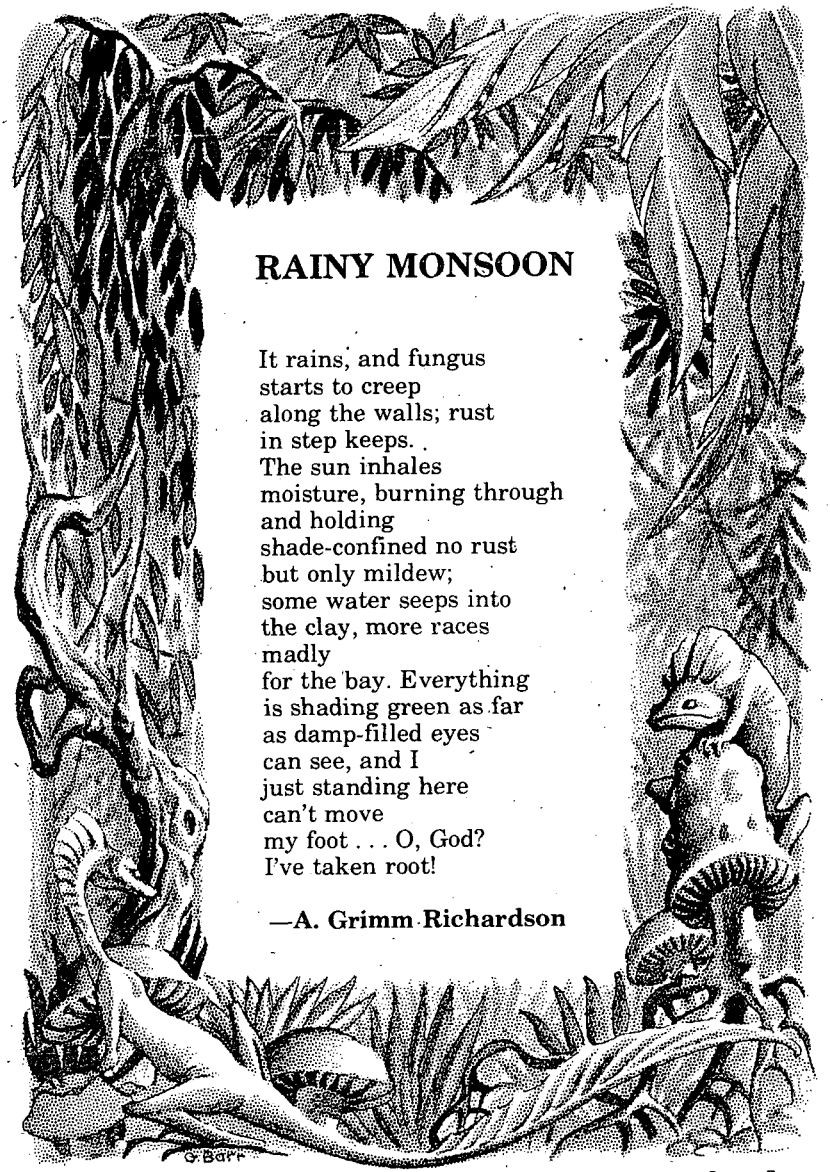


art: George Barr

## RAINY MONSOON

It rains, and fungus
starts to creep
along the walls; rust
in step keeps.
The sun inhales
moisture, burning through
and holding
shade-confined no rust
but only mildew;
some water seeps into
the clay, more races
madly
for the bay. Everything
is shading green as far
as damp-filled eyes
can see, and I
just standing here
can't move
my foot . . . O, God?
I've taken root!

**—A. Grimm Richardson**



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# L'ENVOI
## by John M. Ford

*It's possible for a pun to make more of a point than just that words with different meanings sound the same—such as this one from Mr. Ford.*

Doctors Averbury and Heimdall did an Alphonse-and-Gaston routine at the door of Averbury Biotechnic for a few minutes, then walked through together.

Averbury dropped his briefcase on the floor outside the Containment Lab's transfer lock, and let it lie. There was nothing in it but his notes for the Senate Committee speech, which is to say wastepaper. Wastepaper and junk; this whole place, all twenty privately-funded megabucks of it, was all junk now. The Committee had left the labs, and the recombinant DNA workers in them, to twist slowly in the wind, as they say up Washington way.

"You want to break the news, Heimie? They won't have heard how it came out. I told 'em not to listen. Who wants to get called a Frankenstein fourteen times, in the Congressional Record yet?"

"Oh, God, Paul, not again. Look, you know perfectly well I'm not going to miss the DNA work that much—at least as far as the money's concerned. I've got the WesConCo offer—"

"You're going to hate saying goodbye to those dear little nucleotides as much as I will, Heimie. And hate finding new ways to waste the crude oil supply even more than I would." Averbury stepped out of the UV shower and slipped a paper coverall on. "Wonder if we could make something special for Senator Osterhase. Kind of as a going-away present. Maybe an *E. coli* that'd live in his gut and secrete castor oil forever."

"Osterhase wasn't the only man on the committee."

"Could've fooled me. Where were they when the medical profession was threatening us all with the indiscriminate use of cosmetic surgery? And how many new noses has the Senator had, anyway?"

Heimdall put first his identiplate, then his fingers, into the inner hatch locks. The air-equalizer began pumping. "You've made your point, Paul. But *you* tell them. It's your lab; they're your people."



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In a glare of violet light and a swish of sterile wind, they stepped into the P6 laboratory. Sixteen pairs of eyes looked up.

"All right," said Averbury tiredly. "Everybody out of the gene pool."

## ANSWER TO HOW BAGSON BAGGED A BOARD GAME
## (from page 43)

The game generalizes to any odd number of spots on a zig-zag line like the one shown. The first player can always win if the number of spots (not counting the starting spots) is not 5, or the sum of 5 and any multiple of 8. The sequence of such numbers is 5, 13, 21, 29, 37. . . .

On the board shown, the number of spots (excluding starting spots) is 15. This is not in the above sequence; hence the first player can always win. His first move must be to advance two spots. Thereafter he adopts one of the two following alternatives (he can always do one or the other):

1. He plays so that after his move he has advanced an odd number of spots from the starting spot, and has left 1, 8, or 9 spots between the two counters, or

2. He plays so that after his move he has advanced an even number of spots from the starting spot, and has left 4, 5, or 12 spots between the two counters.

Note that in both cases the odd or even count is from the starting spot, not from the last spot occupied.

When Bagson analyzed the game he suddenly realized it was equivalent to a simpler take-away game played with a pile of counters and described in many twentieth-century puzzle books. Can you think of a way to play a game, isomorphic with the board game, that uses nothing more than a pile of pebbles and rules for removing them from the pile? See page 63 for the answer.



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# SMALL TALENT

## by Steve Perry

art: Jack Gaughan

*Since Mr. Perry's first SF sale (to us), he's sold four more (three to this magazine), joined the Science Fiction Writers of America, started a novel, and gone out and bought a lot of writer stuff—pipe, dictionary, electric typewriter. Unfortunately, he's also cut down his short story production to one every* two *weeks.*



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Olinde looked down at his client. "Not too good," he said. "The lousy minister didn't even bother to show up!"

Tsara'ath flickered his twin pumpkin-and-honeymoon-colored eyes around to look at the human medico-legal's face. He twirled both of his three-fingered claws in a small circle, his race's equivalent of a shrug. A small matter, his claws seemed to say.

Olinde shook his head wonderingly. How could he be so calm about it? The Aerinin just stood there, pseudoscales glittering in the hearing room's primitive direct-overhead lighting. He appeared as totally unconcerned as if the contest was over the small sum of two standards.

When there was eight *million* at stake!

Why the hell wasn't he upset?

The hearing wasn't going well. It looked like the Thitherns were about to screw the little alien—it was beginning to look as if he had less chance than a drop of water in a supernova, and he didn't seem to give a damn. At least not on the surface. Maybe his kind were inner-seethers, roaring furnaces hidden behind a quiet facade.

Maybe.

Christo, why do *I* wind up with cases like this?

The three judges were mulling over another point brought up by the opposition's legal, something they spent most of the time doing so far. The kid was young, maybe twenty-two standards, and he was a jump-and-hustle type, pouncing on everything Olinde said. Probably object if I asked to go to the bathroom, he thought.

The head judge raised his arm and waved his hand airily.

"Your point is accepted. The holotape may be admitted as evidence."

"I object!" Olinde shot to his feet.

"Too late, I've already ruled, legal Olinde."

"But your Worship, those tapes aren't notarized! Anybody could have—"

"You trying for contempt?" cut in another judge. He was the obese one, so fat he looked like a slightly flattened beachball. Olinde wondered how he could carry all that weight in this hellish gravity.

"—ah, no, Sire, it's just that—"

"Then sit down," came the rumble from the beachball.

Olinde sat. Tapes were always worse. It was bad enough seeing a signature, but watching and listening to a holo-agreement made



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it much harder to get around. Whatever small chances they had were rapidly going down the tubes.

Well. Crap, crap, crap!

Tsara'ath turned his chameleon-like head toward Olinde again. "Not to excite yourself," he hissed softly. "All must eventually circle."

Olinde glanced up at the ill-constructed ceiling, feeling disgusted. This wasn't right! The Aerinin ought to be hopping up and down with rage, bouncing his little fifteen kilos about in justified anger. Instead, here he was blithely rattling off some kind of vague karmic philosophy of relative indifference!

It was times like this that made Olinde almost ashamed he was human. This was blatant theft, no matter what they called it, about to be legally sanctioned—worse, there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

His shoulders slumped as he gave in a little to the fight against the gravity, and he sighed as he looked for the hundredth time at the shining colors in the Aerinin's pebbled skin. The harsh lights made tiny, blue-green sparkles, shot through with gold and orange streaks. It was hard to not look at that strange skin, the colors constantly shifting from one bright glow to another.

Tsara'ath looked almost exactly like a miniature tyrannosaur—one covered with a fine layer of the purest Australian opal, so that he glittered like a giant jewel from snout to tail-tip.

They ought to pick on somebody their own size, Olinde thought irrationally. And me, I should have stopped at being a doctor. Nobody made me be a medico-legal. A doctor would have been enough, but no, I had to go for the big money, the prestige! Bah!

While the opposition's legal continued his hardly-needed efforts to sway the judges, Olinde remembered his briefing on this farce. Open-and-shut, his boss had said. A piece of soypro. Sure.

The son-of-a-bitch . . .

"Look Ken, you can do this one almost in your sleep! We've got the contract plastics, pre-lim holotapes, the works. Hell, I could send a student, not even an emdee, except for the ethics committee. Come on, think how good a big settlement will look on your record!"

"You come on, Jorj! It's my week-end off! Send Louis or Dick, Dwight even, I don't care who—just not me!"

"They're already out-system, on the crab thing."



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"Too bad. Janis and the kids are expecting me to be off tomorrow."

"Tell you what—do this one for me and you can take an extra day off next week-end, make it five days."

Olinde raised an eyebrow at his boss.

"You could take that trip to Perryworld you've been talking about, give you plenty of time to catch the shuttle."

Five days. Hmmm. "Well, I . . . There's this thing on Planet-St. George, the Amaker deal I need to finish . . ."

"Consider it handled."

Olinde ran a hand through his new hairlet transplant. Blue scalp was in this month, but the damned stuff sure itched. How had he let Janis talk him into it?

"Yeah, well . . . okay."

Jorj beamed. "Thanks, Ken, I knew I could count on you!"

Well. After all, five days was five days, and the kids had been hassling him about the trip to Perryworld all summer . . .

He looked at the background material, assembled by one of the clerks. It looked easy enough. If everything was in order, it ought to be a simple plea—easy award, straight run-of-the-mill breach-of-contract case—something even a non-medico ought to be able to handle. Points when it came to sal-boost, okay.

Get the pictures first. He slipped the holocassette into his player, and watched as the images formed on his desk top. Bad quality, he noted. Cheap recorder.

Should have been a clue right there.

"—is being holoed for our records, and is only a preliminary tape which has not been notarized." said the speaker. Allowing for distortion in the tape, the man talking looked to be about fifty, nearly bald, and twenty kilos overweight. Real saggy overweight, at that. He had that sunburned look gained from outdoor work—sometimes affected by the rich who liked to slum. He didn't look rich, though. The scale built into the edge of the holo showed him to be about a meter-and-three-quarters tall, and the bottom shimmer-tag spelled out the name: Ian Thal, Minister of Finance for Thither. Olinde didn't recall the name of the planet right away. Could be new, or backwater, couldn't be much either way.

The small alien Thal was talking to looked to be barely a meter high. Olinde recognized him (it?) as an Aerinin, the smallest of the forty-eight known intelligent races in the Galaxy. Although he'd never met one personally, the rough-and-glowing skin was



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both beautiful and unmistakable. Name: Tsara'ath. Title: Merchant.

Thal continued speaking. "This is an offer for a quantity of the chemical medication known as Negrav serum, in an amount sufficient to administer one hundred thousand doses."

The Aerinin seemed to nod slightly.

"For this material, the government of Thither, so represented by myself, does hereby agree to pay the normal purchase price of eight million standards upon receipt of the product, per our usual cash terms."

"We accept," said the Aerinin. His voice was thin and whispery, a not-unexpected reptilian hiss.

There was a click as the tape ended, and the picture faded, leaving the desk nearly bare once again.

Okay. Straight-product sale, standard pre-lim holo agreement.

COD payment in cash was a bit unusual, but not unheard of in such transactions.

Negrav. He'd heard of it, of course, not that he'd known humans could use it. At eighty stads a whack, the stuff wasn't cheap, but worth it to those who needed it.

Negrav nullifed some of the more unpleasant and harmful effects of gravity higher than that its user was used to being in. It made the body run smoother, speeding up basal metabolism so that muscle and connective healed faster and better. It improved catabolism, thinned the blood without damaging it, and did half a dozen odd things to various hormones and enzymes. Requirements for sleep were reduced, lipid build-up was lessened, and athrosclerotic build-up inside arteries was partially reduced.

A wonderful substance for those who moved to worlds with heavier gees than they were used to.

That was as far as his medical memories could take him, and he shuffled through the stack of plastics in the file looking for more information. There wasn't much to—wait, here was a data sheet on Thither.

Ah, gee-and-a-half terran standard pull, that's why the Thitherns wanted the stuff. But a hundred thousand doses? According to the stats, there were only a handful of humans on the planet.

Colonists. They must be expecting colonists. Sure, that would account for it.

A free Negrav shot would go a long way toward keeping a new immigrant happy. Aside from the obvious discomfort of suddenly



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weighing half again one's own weight, there were the premature cardiac and kidney problems that came with higher pull, not to mention the early circulation-senility that hit older people. It looked as if the packagers of Thither's come-hither plan had hit upon a perfect solution to draw badly needed population.

A hundred thousand colonists ought to put a good deal of credit into the local treasury, too. More than enough to make good a bill for eight million stads. So what was the problem? Were the bastards just greedy?

Well. Should be able to get this thing straightened out easily enough. Five days off instead of the usual four, huh?

It was awkward talking to someone slightly over knee-high. Olinde got around it by offering the alien a table, and then sitting in the room's lowest form-chair himself. It brought their eyes almost onto a level plane. Which would almost be the only thing in the room which was level. Frontier worlds always seemed to be a bit scraggly around the edges, and Thither was no exception. On Earth, or even Harmon, this room in the best hotel on-planet would be a flophouse.

"So they simply refused to pay?"

"Not precisely," the Aerinin said.

The little creature handed Olinde a small plastic cube. The human scratched a colored spot on one face, and a projection appeared on the table in front of Tsara'ath. It was a cred-vouch.

"Two hundred thousand standards? That's less than a fortieth of the amount!"

"I compliment you on your powers of mathematical computation."

"What was their explanation?"

"Minister Thal stated that this was the amount agreed upon."

"That's absurd! I saw the holo pre-lim myself!"

"Perhaps the term 'cash' has a different meaning among humans?"

"The hell it does!"

Olinde shuffled quickly through the case he had until he came up with the contract plastic. He fed it to the ancient scanner, a black-and-white, and watched as the screen glowed to blurry life. He skimmed until he found the payment clause.

"There it is, plain as Sol, 'usual cash terms' . . ."

Uh oh. A tiny warning buzzed-hummed in the back of his mind. Usual? What was that word doing in there? That wasn't normal.



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And where had he heard it before? The tape, it was on the tape just like that.

Oops, he thought.

"Oops," he said.

"There is some problem?"

"The . . . ah . . . wording is a bit—I'd better go over the contracts again. Why don't I take these to my room and—"

"I do not mind waiting, if you wish to view them here."

"It may take a few minutes."

It took nearly an hour, and Olinde was eye-strained and sweaty when he finished. The air conditioners didn't work very well, either.

"We may have a slight problem," the medico-legal said.

"Oh?"

"It seems that each time 'cash terms' is mentioned, it's modified by the word 'usual'."

Tsara'ath said nothing.

"Cash is cash, generally speaking, but, well . . . I think I'd better have a word with the counsel for the defense."

Tsara'ath's claws twirled. "I leave it to you."

Thanks a whole lot, Olinde thought. And while I'm at it, I'd better have a few words with the local Confederation Representative, too. If this one-ship world even *has* one . . .

Well, crap, sooner or later, he'd have to tell him. It had to be done.

"You recall I spoke of a problem we might have?"

Tsara'ath nodded.

"We definitely have it."

"If you would explain."

"It seems that the Thitherns have never bought anything else to speak of from off-world in cash before, except one time. Some kind of farming equipment."

"And?"

"They paid 2½% cash down, with each subsequent payment in cash, all right. Genuine cred-vouch, good anywhere in the civilized Galaxy. For forty years!"

He could see Tsara'ath's mind digest that bit of information.

"In the strictest sense, they did pay cash, you see, only *not all at one time!*"

"Ah."

Yeah. Ah. An unethical shyster's trick, playing games with the



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language, a dirty, low-IQ, back-biting scam, and—

—strictly speaking, probably legal.

"Such is common among your kind?"

"Hell no it isn't, not according to Confederation standards! But . . ."

"Another problem?"

Olinde cleared his throat, gone suddenly dry. "Well, this is a relatively new world, less than eighty years human-settled, so it doesn't have sufficient standards to meet entrance requirements to the Confederation of Man."

"And that means . . . ?"

"It means that in matters concerning local trade, excluding that with Confederation members, they make their own laws. Which means we can't get the litigation into a System Court, only a local one."

"I see."

"They have broken no Confederation laws, at least none that can be enforced here. I spoke with the Conrep on this world, and his hands are tied. It's a civil matter."

"Then we must take the matter to the local court. They will surely give us a fair hearing?"

Gods, thought Olinde, an idealist. Sure they will. "Wait until I get my hands on Jorj, the rotten mothe—"

"Please excuse me?"

"Oh, sorry, a personal matter. Well, I'll see what I can do. Maybe we can appeal to their better nature." He paused.

"Or threats, maybe."

"Can you do that?"

"No, but maybe they won't know that."

"I leave it to you."

I wish he'd stop saying that, thought Olinde sourly. This kind of thing certainly wasn't going to look good on his record. It's your ass when I see you, Jorj, your ass . . .

He went through the proper motions, filing his brief, but Olinde didn't feel as if he had a great deal of hope. Local justice on the newer planets tended to run to kangaroo court-style, usually in a ratio to the world's settled age. The less time people had been there, the more likely they were to hang the sons'o'bitches, and good riddance!

It looked as if the Aerinin was learning the hard way that dealing with an extra-con human world was apt to get the seller as stung as the buyer.



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The hearing was set before a three-judge tribunal with hardly a delay. Olinde went back to talk to his client.

"Is this your first contact with humans?"

"On such a matter, yes."

"I'm sorry it had to be this way. You must have a very bad impression of us."

"It would be foolish to judge all by a few."

"You are more charitable than we deserve."

Tsara'ath shrugged with his claws. "One way or another, the circle always completes itself. Worry cannot help."

Olinde found it an effort to raise his hand in the gravity. His arm felt like lead as he tried a sweeping gesture with it.

"Maybe. But it's a shame your first dealings with men should be under such circumstances." He gave up on gestures, and settled deeply into his form-chair. It hummed and massaged his aching muscles.

"I wonder why they even took the risk, though. It would seem easier just to obtain a few samples from you and then pay a pirate lab to dublicate the Negrav. Less likely to ruin future trade, and keep any black marks off the record as far as the Confederation was concerned."

The Aerinin's nostrils flared, a sign Olinde took to be amusement. "You have copies of the contract?" Tsara'ath asked.

Olinde rummaged around in his case until he found the plastic. He fed it to the scanner.

"Observe the listing of ingredients used in the serum as prepared for humans. Our laws require we show them, although not in exact proportions, of course."

The medico-legal touched a control, and—

—Lord, would you look at that! His basic medical degree gave him enough knowledge to appreciate what he was seeing.

There must be thirty double-and-triple chain polypeptides, a dozen filterable and non-filterable viruses, several kinds of mycobacteria and half a hundred enzymes and hormones included in that mixture! It was incredible!

"That's incredible!" Olinde said.

"We have a small talent in the field."

Small talent, indeed! Only a race of master chemists, experts in highly sophisticated viral/molecular engineering could produce such a compound and keep it stable! No wonder the Thitherns didn't try to have it copied—it was highly unlikely there was another race that could—certainly humans couldn't.



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He looked further down the list of ingredients, recognizing some, blank on others. Several of the things seemed to come from something called a yur'ahn.

"A small animal on my homeworld," Tsara'ath explained. "Very much like us in appearance, but non-intelligent. Somewhat like your own primates, the mankeys."

"Monkeys," Olinde corrected automatically.

"Forgive my ignorance. In any event, we make use of them, Before the Change, of course."

"The Change?"

"It has to do with our . . . skin. You see, we are born smooth, much like yourself. The integumentary development we bear is caused by certain bacteria common on our world—it affects all of our higher animal life at about six cycles—two terran years."

"Those of our people born off-world can receive a simple vaccine to enable them to Change, or simpler still, visit the Homeworld. An unChanged Aerinin is . . . an unpleasant sight."

Most interesting from a medical standpoint, even if no help legally, Olinde thought.

Tsara'ath continued what was beginning to sound like a lecture. "The yur'ahn are especially useful for the enteric prog viruses, which form a complex symbiosis with the mycobacteria, such as the leprae and the scinan. These in turn cause the mycobacteria to act upon . . ." he droned on, but Olinde wasn't really hearing it. His microbiology was twenty years old, out-of-date, and never his best subject in any event. Maybe one of the reasons I went into law, he thought. Who could keep up with the myriad number of flora and fauna in the microscopic world?

". . . of course there are certain neutralizing compounds added to prevent the natural development of the associated . . ."

"Yes, well, I certainly hope I can persuade the good people of this world to give you the money you deserve for you fine work," Olinde broke in.

Tsara'ath's nostrils quivered briefly in a laugh.

"It is to be hoped," he said.

The hearing room was a crude, pre-cast shelter, like most of the other buildings he'd seen on this planet. Barely civilized, and certainly inefficent, wasting all that space like that!

It had the feel of a temporary camp, a soon-to-be abandoned site, useless after the real buildings were put up. Only this building was probably over fifty years old itself.



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Even the chairs were non-mechanical; hard and uncomfortable, they appeared to be made from some local product, probably some tough-stemmed plant. The gravity never ceased dragging at him with its giant-and-heavy fingers, and he wondered which god he'd offended to deserve this. He could use a bit of his client's product. Maybe I ought to ask him if he's got any samples with him, Olinde thought.

While it looked as if it were going to be an uncomfortable session, it didn't appear as if it were going to be a very long one. He doubted if the "trial" was going to be much more than a formality. After all, the judges were locals, the opposition was local, the legal was a local and the verdict was going to affect local money. His boss had been right; open-and-shut case, all right. We open, they shut us down.

Tsara'ath looked unperturbed. He stood quietly on the table in his three-point stance, arms folded comfortably across his sparkling torso.

"—and it is our contention that the Minister of Finance did willfully enter into a contract under false pretenses, deliberately misleading my client while being fully aware of his actions. The terminology skates very close to the edge of fraud, and is highly frowned upon in the civilized Confederation!"

There. That was a veiled enough threat.

One of the judges appeared to be trying to stare a hole through Olinde. It was the head judge, a tough-looking character of about forty with a scar across his nose. Didn't they even have plastic medicos on this world? The judge looked as if he'd like to wipe the dirt from the floor with Olinde's face.

"We aren't *in* your precious Confederation, legal Olinde, and we manage to take care of ourselves quite nicely, thank you. We can interpret our laws just fine!"

I'll bet you can, thought Olinde. So much for veiled threats.

"Counsel?" said the next judge in line. He was so fat he occupied at least two seats on the bench. Maybe three.

The opposition's legal looked flustered for a second. "Oh, sorry, ah, we, ah . . . deny all charges, your Worship."

"Looks like we've got a point of contention," said the third judge. He was dressed like a farmer, his shirtsleeves rolled up past his rough-and-bumpy elbows. "So let's get it going—I've got a crop to get in."

That figured.

"I'd like to offer into evidence the transcript of Falk vs. Ryan



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2455 for precedent." That was standard, merely background information to get in for the judges to utilize in any ruling that might need questions answered.

"Objection," said the opposition's legal.

"What? On what grounds?" Olinde's face turned red under his blue hairlet. From five meters, it gave him a purple effect.

"Such transcripts are from Confederation sources—we have no way to check their accuracy immediately without a great deal of cost and effort on the part of this court."

"That's absurd! I'll pay for the damned—"

"Besides, such things could be easily distorted by off-world judges unfamiliar with *our* world's way of doing things."

Olinde sputtered, unable to say anthing.

"True," said the beachball.

"Agreed," agreed the farmer.

"No doubt in my mind at all," added scarface. "Objection sustained. No transcripts."

Son-of-a-bitch! thought Olinde. So that's how it's going to go.

He was right. That's exactly how it went.

"I'm sorry, Tsara'ath." Olinde really meant it.

"You did what you could." So calm!

"How can you *do* that?" Olinde exploded. "You just got beaten out of eight million credit standards!"

"Perhaps."

" 'Perhaps' my ass! At best it will take forty years for you to get paid. That's if these hayseeds don't pass some kind of law between now and then cutting all your money off!"

Tsara'ath was silent for a moment, as if he were debating with himself whether to tell Olinde something.

"It may be they will wish to purchase something from us in the future.

"After all, we do produce other medicines not available anywhere else. Next time, we will obtain our fee in advance."

"Oh, great. Wonderful. Good thinking, but a bit late!"

Tsara'ath's nostrils quivered for the briefest of instants.

"Things are not always as they seem," he hissed. "For instance, although humans appear very similar to melvanains, their chemical make-up is quite different."

How wonderful, thought Olinde bleakly. Eight million lost, my rep in flames, and he gives me a lecture on comparative anatomy. Just what I needed.



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Tsara'ath went on. "Thus it is when we developed the Negrav formulation for humans, we had to change the ingredients somewhat from those we used for the melvanians."

What was this leading to? Something, surely.

"We have dealt with alien, pardon me, other races for nearly five hundred of your years, and we have learned . . . other things aside from our small skills in producing a product. We have also learned valuable things about marketing our wares."

Oh, really! Some example I just saw. But Olinde refrained from saying it aloud.

"For instance, did you know there was a saying among the bartering races about humans?"

"What? The only good human is a—"

"No, I refer to the other saying: Trust a human half as far as he can be thrown—less if you're bigger than he."

Olinde laughed. "I haven't heard that one, but it seems reasonable enough."

"It is quite well known."

He couldn't stand it any longer. "If it is so well known, why the hell didn't you expect something like this?"

"But we did, certainly."

Olinde fought to keep his mouth from falling open, and lost.

"You *expected* it? Then how . . . why?"

"As I have said, it may be that in the future, this particular group of humans will have need of certain of our products. You may be certain our profits from any such transactions will more than compesate for any loss we sustain here today."

A sudden suspicion dawned in Olinde's mind.

"You sound very confident they'll want to deal with you again? Why should they?"

Tsara'ath's claws circled in a shrug.

Olinde's mind race over the events of the past several hours, the last two days. Something tugged at his memory, some small fact, something he couldn't quite place.

Wait. Wait a minute. Could it be . . . ? No, certainly not. Still . . .

"Assuming the Thitherns did wish to buy something from you, hypothetically speaking, how long might pass before they might want to buy?"

"You are, of course, required to maintain confidentiality as our legal?"

"Of course." Olinde had a sinking feeling.



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"Then I would estimate about six of our cycles—two of your years might elapse."

Uh oh. Olinde strained for recent recall, at the same time prodding his earlier, rusty memories of his long-ago medical days.

Whoops. Suddenly it clicked into his brain, the pieces he couldn't remember. Why, it had been there all along! How could he have missed it?

Oh, my. It couldn't be, could it? He had to be wrong.

Tsara'ath didn't answer directly when he asked, but the flare of the little lizard's nostrils would have no doubt equaled the loudest human laugh.

Christo and all his angels! No wonder he hadn't been worried! Lord, lord, lord!

He could imagine what the new settlers of Thither would do when they found out, two years from now. He certainly wouldn't want to have anything to do with the government of that planet at that time.

And, oh, yes, there'd be a new saying then, if there wasn't one already. Something about the little sparkling lizards who made drugs for the Galaxy. How would it go?

You can't cheat the Aerinin?

For certain.

It fit. Right down the line. The mysterious change that scaled amd glittered the skins of higher animals on Tsara'ath's world. The things they used in the Negrav serum. The fact that it would take two years to happen. Olinde dredged up the names of the mycobacteria the Aerinin had mentioned, those used in the mixture.

Let's see. Leprae was known as Hansen's bacillus, better known for what it caused—leprosy. What was the other? Scinan? He didn't recognize that one, but he could guess what it did. It had to be the agent responsible for the Change. Roughly translated, Scinan meant 'shining', so that'd be it, all right.

Damn. In two years, the settlers of Thithern were going to start looking like big Australian opals, sparkling, giant-sized versions of Tsara'ath's people. Well. It wouldn't be so bad, not if you liked glitter . . .

Brother.

"But wait," Olinde said. "What if they'd paid? What if they hadn't tried to cheat you?"

"It would have been discovered that a certain agent had accidentally been left out of the serum. Understandable since it is



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our first encounter with humans, how a little thing like that might be forgotten in the preparation. Additional serum containing the missing ingredient would have been made availible at no extra charge, of course."

"Of course," Olinde added in a thin echo.

"I must be leaving," Tsara'ath said suddenly. "I have an appointment with the Ambassador of Remath, a Justina world. A certain drug they wish to obtain."

Olinde nodded, watching the glitter of the alien's small back as he walked away.

I certainly hope the Justina pay their bills, he thought.

## SECOND SOLUTION TO HOW BAGSON BAGGED A BOARD GAME (from page 48)

The board game is equivalent to an old game that Henry E. Dudeney, in *Amusements in Mathematics*, problem 392, calls "The Pebble Game." Fifteen pebbles are placed on a table. Players take turns taking 1, 2, or 3 pebbles. After all pebbles are taken, the person who holds an odd number of pebbles wins.

It is easy to see the isomorphism. Not counting the two starting spots, there are 15 spots on the board. Each time a player advances his piece it is the same as removing 1, 2, or 3 spots from those that remain between the two pieces. When the counters meet, all the spots (pebbles) are gone, and the player with his counter inside the circle has "taken" an odd number of spots.

The game can be generalized to any odd number of pebbles and the taking of any number of pebbles from $a$ through $b$, where $a$ and $b$ are any positive integers, and $b$ is equal to or greater than $a$. (See problem 177 in Geoffrey Mott-Smith's *Mathematical Puzzles*, Dover, 1954, and problem 24 in Roland Sprague's *Recreation in Mathematics*, London: Blackie, 1963.)

Why will the game not generalize to an even number of pebbles? The solution is on page 81.



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# SANCTUARY
## by Jayge Carr
**art: George Barr.**

*Mrs. Carr reports she's old enough to vote but not old enough to collect social security. She does admit to better than a quarter century of reading SF. She used to knit, crochet, do crewel embroidery, and sew. Now that writing has absorbed all her spare time, her kids would prefer that she go back to knitting, crocheting, etc. She once attended camp on the site where NASA-Houston now stands. Her youngest daugher, now 8, yearns to be a paleontologist; Mrs. Carr suspects that it's all in hopes of someday, somehow, meeting a real, live dinosaur in the all too fangy flesh.*



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**Tirelessly, patiently, the King of the Grove makes his rounds, inspecting his domain for the slightest damage, a broken branch, torn foliage. Probably the wind did it—but it may be the sign of an Invader. After each false alarm (for animals have long since learned to avoid the Grove, and the lawless are rare on Vair'tgen), he carefully removes and buries the injured material, to prevent a needless second search.**

**Thus it has been in the Grove on Vair'tgen, years past remembering; thus it will be, years beyond numbering. The King, peerless, his province never changing, untouchable in his Sanctuary—until a Challenger comes and is successful, vanquishing the former King to become King in his stead. . . .**

Crispin DeLong was on the run—again. It wasn't his fault, not really his fault. (It never was, of course.) How *could* he have suspected the fool girl would react like that? (At the memory of gouts of scarlet and darkening reddish brown spattered all over his lovely turquoise and aqua rooms, he shuddered, his aesthetic tastes outraged.)

Why had she done this to him?

He'd indulged all her whims, hadn't he, listened to her eternal plaints of boredom. Something new, Crispin, something different. I'm bored, Crispin, bored!

He'd given her this and gotten her that.

I'm *bored*, Crispin!

Until there was only one thing left. He'd told her it was scarce, expensive; he only had a few doses left. (He *had* warned her, hadn't he?) It wasn't a physical addiction, he didn't play around with that sort. (Too dangerous; the Big Boys had that racket fused tight.)

More, Crispin!

And when he ran out—

*More, Crispin!*

But she was a lovely thing (Crispin DeLong had exquisite taste) and he had contacts. (Crispin DeLong always had contacts.) The best, strato-high creds, had been a pornofeelie. He'd told her it was porno, *hard* porno, hadn't he? She hadn't been hurt, had actually enjoyed it. (Most of it, anyway, and they had zonked her through the worst parts, hadn't they?) All right, he kept most of the fee, but she got her joie, lots of it, didn't she?

And everything had been reet 'n sweet, until one day she asked



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to sense the feelie. (Had she heard about his grumblings? But he told her, right at the start, that he always got bored himself sooner or later. Always.) He'd have given her a sense, shared it with her, any time she asked; but that afternoon he had an appointment he couldn't afford to break. (Crispin DeLong often had appointments he couldn't afford to break.) With an indulgent laugh, he'd keyed open the concealed safe, tossed her the feelie, and waved a cheery "See you soon" as he went out the door. . . .

When he returned and saw what was left of her, and what was sticking up out of her curving midriff—his prized XXth century bayonet (Adding insult to injury)—he knew the hardnoses would never believe it was *suicide*—

She was still dying when he arrived; but before his horrified eyes could absorb the whole dreadful scene, she shuddered and went limp, that graceless sprawl that left only a dead lump of flesh. . . .

And there he was, right at the death, *his* suite, *his* bayonet, *his* woman (that he had complained about, only to one or two intimate friends, true—but the hardnoses had *ways.)*

He'd had only minutes grace. As soon as she died, a light had started blinking at the nearest hardnose office, blinking fast because it was unmodified by a hospital resonance. But he knew what to do, had an escape plan ready. (Crispin DeLong always had an escape plan ready.)

Empty the safe, out the door, casual, casual. A quick-change in the nearest public 'fresher, and then, Master Stroke, back to the same commapt, to the suite in the different name, different identity. Then the fun part. Call the hardnoses, demand an escort, the other identity is hand-carrying Commercial Secrets. The disguise wouldn't pass an *alerted* hardnose, but the escort could chute him through the port Redtape and into a rented Jumper—if the alarm hadn't gone out—and—it's the risk that makes the tingle.

Once beyond strato and cleared for Jump, he should have been safe. But this time (had the nosies gotten some part of his true record?) they hadn't given up with the meaningless formality of an All-Planets Alert. (Too expensive to be sent but to the nearest planets, and usually ignored then.)

To make absolutely sure, he'd headed outcluster.

Three *long* Long-Jumps later, he'd asked for routine landing clearance. (Never make unnecessary waves.) And seen two sleek grey vessels leap out of strato at him, while the siren on his control panel howled and a harsh voice blared through his speaker.



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He hadn't stopped to think, just hit the controls, Jumping blind.

Panting, wiping sweat from his forehead, he scanned his screen while the comp began figuring where he was. To his horror, two blips appeared on his screen, charging toward him on subJump drive. They must have locked onto his ship's ID; only the microscopic error in Jump emergence gave him any breathing space.

He had waited, tense and intent, until they were almost within grappling range, hoping to give the navigator time for its computations. He wanted to make the Den, the lawless stars, where he would be safe, could buy a new identity. But they crowded him too close. Another quick, blind Jump to anywhere. And, too soon, two blips on his screen.

It had become a deadly game of Hide and Go Seek. Jump, try to locate yourself, try to compute a target, see the blips—*Jump.*

Crispin DeLong knew every kind of shell game there was—but never before had he been the pea.

A game with a time limit—his fuel was getting low.

After each Jump he hopefully checked each planet within microJump range, hoping for a high-tech world, where he could take the personal Flit down, lose himself until he could buy a new identity, a new Jumper. But HT worlds were rare, and his Jumps random. He didn't want to exile himself for life on some grubby primitive world.

Nor an associate world, either, one that knew of the space culture but wasn't part of it. Not if he had to abandon the tagged jumper. Space departures from such worlds were too rare, too hard to muscle in on. And—the nosies could land; and the nosies had *ways.*

Another associate world, Wheel take it! And the fuel dangerously low.

Wait! Wait-a-minute! Vair'tgen! Hadn't he heard something? He chewed his lip; the navigator could finish the simple microJump before they got too close. But following a micro—they'd be riding his tail when they emerged. Whatever it was he half-remembered, it had better be *good.* Take another blind Jump, or—they're too close! He stabbed—for the micro.

He was burning strato with the nosies on his tail when he remembered: *an island shaped like a four-lobed lucky piece, the tail of the biggest continent points right to it—*

Wheel, they're close! You'd think that girl was the big-nosy's daughter!

Island, island, where are you, island?



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There!

The Jumper wasn't meant to be used as a low-level flyer. Crispin's pass produced a shockwave that made trees sway, flattened fields of grain, and knocked to rubble a small old structure perched on the top of an exposed hillock. The King of the Grove went anxiously about, not understanding this sudden noise, hot blast.

But Crispin had seen what he needed: *a long rectangular building and a circular grove of trees, like an i and its dot, only the circle is hollow—nothing else on that end of the island—inside the circle—sanctuary—*

Even in the screen, the building looked incredibly old. (He gave no thought at all to the anonymous pile of stone and wood at the other end of the island.) *His* building poised on the lip of a ring of stone, a giant's amphitheater, sheltering what stood within: a flat arena, in the center, a slightly raised dias, with a ring of solid green. That had to be it!

*—sacred to their beliefs—nosies won't touch it—or you in it—never—can't interfere with religion—sanctuary—*

He could thumb his nose at the nosies (ha! ha!) from a sanctuary. And after a while, they'd get tired and go away, and he'd have a clear path to the Den, as long as he avoided the HT worlds while he Jumped. And the contents of his safe would buy him a new identity, with enough left to keep him for quite a while, even in the expensive Den. . . .

Sanctuary. . .

Getting down was tricky; had to compute it just right. (Mustn't knock down our precious sanctuary!) But Crispin landed without even a thump almost in the center of the ring of green. Safe! (But wasn't there more, something else, something he couldn't quite bring to mind?)

Air was breathable, he opened the hatch, looked around. The circle seemed oddly solid. Curious, he levoed down, moved toward the nearest trees. Ah-ha—no trunks. Instead, radiating from a central, ground-level core were twenty or so separate stalks, foliage laden, curving upward in a lovely vase shape. Standing beside one of them, he could see an outer ring of trees. They were arranged in concentric rings, staggered, so that from the distance one saw solidity, but closer could spot easy paths between rows, gaps between individual trees. Crispin walked into the space between the two inner rings, explored further, counted five separate rings.



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The King of the Grove was inspecting the outer ring, well around the curve from where Crispin was; the bulk of the trees muffled the newcomer's rather noisy movements. But when the King moved into the inner circle, he saw the Jumper, slender and executive-plum, glowing in the sunlight.

"Hey, get away from that!" Crispin saw something out of the corner of his eye. He charged into the center, carelessly thrusting branches from his path. The King of the Grove turned, saw the Intruder. He drew his sword. Sunlight flashed from the blade to Crispin's eyes. He remembered the rest. *—only one can be in the Grove at a time—somebody already there—run him out—or* kill *him—*

"All right," Crispin shouted. "Leave, scram, vamoose, burn ions. It's my turn now." He made a sweeping "OUT!" gesture with his left hand (the right rested on his belt holster); the broken leaf that was caught in the intricate embroidery of his cuff glowed softly chartreuse. The King's eyes focussed on the leaf; a glow lit their dull grey. Raising his sword, he took a step toward Crispin.

"Look here, fellow, it's my turn, I say! Get out. You fool, I don't want to burn you—" The King trotted steadily toward Crispin, sword out-thrust.

"Go away, get out. It's my turn, I say! One more step—get away! No-ooo!" The flamer energy was invisible, but the bright orange guidelight wasn't. The King of the Grove saw the strange light flash over his head; he didn't even slow down.

Crispin lowered his aim.

The King of the Grove collapsed in an untidy heap. Crispin's Jumper glowed briefly as it absorbed much of the energy; but leaves were withered on two of the trees from the small amount reflected from the Jumper's smooth side.

Crispin stomped over and kicked the unmoving mass. "You made me do it," he accused querulously. Personal killing made his stomach queasy. "It's all your fault. I told you to get out, I told you it was *my* turn."

The ex-King of the Grove, naturally, made no reply.

"All your fault," Crispin muttered, giving his erstwhile opponent one final kick. He adjusted the flamer for wide-beam disperse and hesitated. Why waste the energy? Who knew, after all, how many might come to dispute his precious sanctuary? It wasn't as if he had anything to hide; by the rules of this place he'd had the right to kill. But he couldn't just leave the thing lying and stinking; he didn't want to share this space with a



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smelly corpse.

His eyes searched. Over there now, the ground looked soft enough. Yes, definitely, over *there*. And the jumper had a complete tool kit.

There. He sighed. A neat job. Even if you knew, it was hard to distinguish the neat rectangle of replaced sod. If he hadn't had those two trees with withered leaves (wonder what caused that; hope not some disease!) on either side of the grave, he'd have difficulty finding it himself. A few days, some rain, and it would take sophisticated nosy equipment to pinpoint the spot. And the nosies—ha! ha! were barred from the whole grove.

All he had to do now was wait. The Jumper was well supplied. Maybe he could entice a native female (if they weren't spiny all over like that male; or maybe the spines could be removed) into the grove—

That was it, then. Just—wait.

Funny-looking trees. All the same kind, all the same size. Something odd about the branches. Might as well take another look.

Crispin stalked over to the nearest tree, brushed the leaves aside to examine the stalk. It was silvery grey, matte smooth except where smaller branches emerged. He tugged gently, getting the feel of it.

That's what's odd. It's too heavy.

*Way* too heavy. He pulled his hand away, oblivious to the myriad hairline scratches that criss-crossed its surface. Almost like—in high excitement, he pawed through the tool kit.

By the Wheel Itself! The main branches were tungsten, solid except for narrow channels; the smaller ones were platinum or germanium or tellurium or—Impossible! But don't oysters (ugly but delicious) secrete pearls? Aren't there sea weeds which concentrate iodine, bromine, other minerals in themselves? Other cases of animals depositing chemicals, minerals in bones, shells, flesh?

This place must be worth—

He couldn't compute it; his mind kept dropping zeroes.

"You beauties; oh, you *beauties,*" he crooned, stroking the nearest limb.

A rustle, somewhere around the circumference. Someone was stealing his precious trees! Flamer in hand, he hurried to investigate.

Nortyn iDan, Major in the U.C. Security forces, was barely con-



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trolling his fury and frustration. "You understand," he grated out for the fourth time, "he is a criminal. We only wish to take him away for rehabilitation, so he will not commit any more evil acts. And you will be protected from him."

The little humanoid with the smooth blue skin that Nortyn thought of as the Abbot (though that was not an accurate translation of his title) nodded patiently. "We understand. But he has entered the Grove. We cannot allow you to remove him."

"But, Wheel above us!, he's killed your people. Six in that building that collapsed, and—"

"Seven," murmured the Elder, who was not truly an abbot.

"Seven, then, *and* that poor devil in the woods *and* that miserable soul who was bringing him food."

"Yes. These he has killed. But—he has entered the Grove."

Nortyn ground his teeth together audibly.

"Good it was you could tell us that he has food in that strange vehicle of his. I mourn we lost Uveen ere yet we knew."

"I'm almost sorry it wasn't more. Maybe if you'd lost enough, you'd let us take him, the murdering scum!"

"Oh, no, never, not while he is in the grove."

"Look," Nortyn ground his teeth together again. "I'll make a deal with you. We'll get DeLong out, and my partner Frid'll stay in your grove and care for it until I can bring you another criminal, a rehabilitated one."

"Oh, no!" There was genuine horror in the slanting eyes, distress in the threshing tail. "Never! You and your partner are good men, worthy men, needed men. Never could I allow one of you to set foot in the grove."

"Arrrrrgh!" Again Nortyn controlled himself. "But, don't you understand, sir? We can't stay here indefinitely waiting for DeLong to come out of your grove. We have other duties to return to."

The tail disappeared inside the long, dun-colored robes. "It is you who does not understand. Come with me, please."

It was a long walk to the grove. Nortyn, fuming, matched his stride to his companion's shorter legs in dour silence. If he didn't bring that scum DeLong back, the chief'd have his head on a platter. Besides, he was *dangerous*. And he was going to get away scot-free. . . .

A four-fingered hand brushed his arm. "This is close enough, law-enforcer. Nearer we would not be safe." Nortyn looked up from his feet. The grove was about twenty meters away, a giant



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curving leafy wall, the smooth lyre shapes blending together, the top as smooth as though trimmed by a giant's shears.

"This is your grove, huh?"

"Yes. Here we will wait."

"For what?"

"You shall see. Be not impatient, pursuer of evil-doers."

"Umph." He studied the trees. Ordinary enough, except for their odd sameness of size. Pale-green leaves, dark-brown branches. And, yet—"They're not like the other trees around here, are they? Are they from somewhere else, the main continent, what-do-you-call-it, Mortigys?"

"No one knows from whence they came. We know of no others like them on our world."

"Unique, eh," Nortyn whistled. "That's why you worship them, eh?"

Slanted yellow-creme eyes stared into his bluish-grey ones with an expression he couldn't read. "Worship? You think we—hist! Silence. *He* comes!"

Nortyn placed his three-fingered (one of these days he was going to *have* to get prosthetics!) right hand on his pistol-butt.

"No," whispered the not-Abbot fiercely. "He will not harm us if we speak not loudly nor venture too close."

Nortyn watched his prey suspiciously, but the little blue guy seemed to be right. DeLong was oblivious to them; he was intent on the trees, examining each stem and branch and leaf with intense care.

As he worked his slow way around the circle, Nortyn began to hear his low mutter; at length, he could distinguish words. "Nobody gonna take my leaves, nobody gonna steal my branches, nobody gonna touch my trees, nobody gonna take my leaves, nobody . . ."

"What says he?" the not-Abbot asked.

Nortyn translated.

"It is done then. May he live long!"

Nortyn frowned. "I still don't understand."

"He is acceptable. Let us away from here. Explaining will be the easier, now that your own eyes have seen."

Nortyn stared at the engrossed Crispin, a suspicion beginning to form. "Perhaps you would permit me to repay your hospitality," he said formally.

The not-Abbot seemed fascinated by the liquor Nortyn and his partner, Frid Tenbuun, served. It was the same pale amber as his eyes; and after the first cautious sip, he swirled it round and



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round in the glass, staring into cool bubbling depths. Frid had gotten a quick summary from Nortyn; and being a stolid, patient man in contrast to Nortyn's nervous energy, he was content to sit quietly enjoying his own drink.

Nortyn could bear it no longer. "You said, sir, that you would explain."

"So I did. But—where does one begin? With a grove of trees like no others? With the power to attract what they need. You said worship, honored sir, but does one worship the tidal wave, the typhoon, the earthquake? Nay, rather, one avoids them if one can, tries to heal the devastation if one cannot. The trees need *one,* as you saw. Only one, but they must have that one. If they have not one, they *draw.* In our past, tens of thousands have walked into the sea, when the trees called. So, now, we are here. To serve the one; to become the one, if needs be."

"When you don't have enough criminals, you mean," said Nortyn.

"We have few, very few, criminals on Vair'tgen. But now and again, one of your outworlders, such as this you have hunted, hears a garbled tale, and comes."

"But why," Frid spoke for the first time, "only criminals? Why can only criminals—or yourselves—enter the grove?"

"Because only criminals would be desperate enough, only dedicates willing. You saw your criminal, peace-maker. And in him the change has scarce begun. In time, he will be completely mindless, or, rather, his mind will be the grove's mind. He will be a limb of the grove. A useful, mobile limb. No more, no less. They need only one, as I said. But they *must* have that one."

" 'Nobody gonna touch my trees,' " Nortyn repeated in growing horror.

"Yes, now you understand. He who enters the grove and is accepted, loses his soul. Or, if you prefer, his individual mind, his personality. Only one desperate for life on any terms—or one schooled his life-long in the ideals of self-sacrifice—would be willing. So the grove is a—Sanctuary."

"But," Nortyn asked, "why only the one?"

"Perhaps," fingers spread wide gave the effect of a shrug, "they can only control accurately the one, though they can call many. But always, there has been the one, only the one. Any intruder is an invader, a potential destroyer of trees. The one attacks. He kills—or is killed. If he dies, the trees search for another; the victor is there, waiting. Usually, he has touched the trees. They de-



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cide. If he is acceptable, he stays. Soon, he begins to hunger. The trees—by instinct or intelligence, I know not—know that the one must feed. They allow one of us to approach, with food, to leave it where the one may find it. They—distract the one."

"But DeLong killed your—Uveen."

"He was not yet under good control. And—he was not hungry."

"So you're sure he won't come back out," said Frid.

"Never. He is acceptable. He will serve the trees, until he dies a natural death, or is killed by another such as he. The trees take care of the one. If no other criminal comes, and kills him, he will live long. Very, very long."

"A life sentence, poor devil," Nortyn muttered.

"I think the chief'll be satisfied," Frid agreed.

**Tirelessly, patiently, the King of the Grove makes his rounds, inspecting his domain for the slightest damage, a broken branch, torn foliage. Probably the wind did it—but it may be the sign of an Invader. After each false alarm (for animals have long since learned to avoid the Grove, and the lawless are rare on Vair'tgen), he carefully removes and buries the injured material, to prevent a needless second search.**

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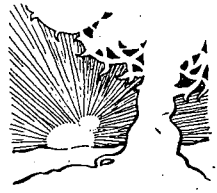



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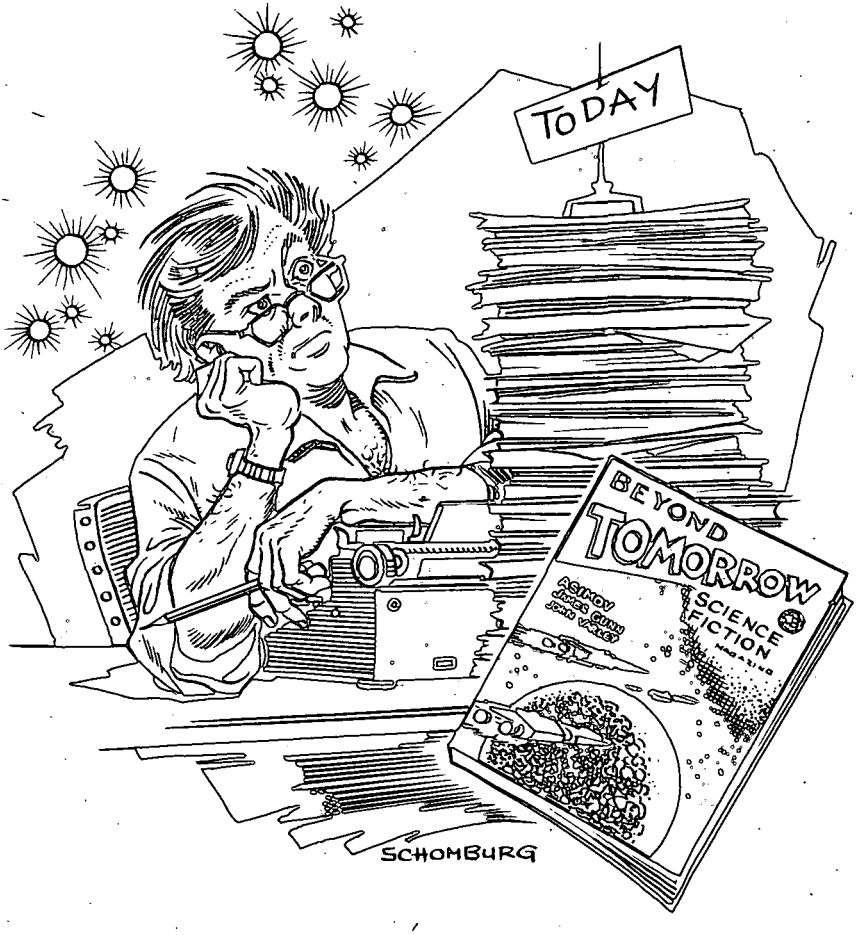


# SLUSH

by K. J. Snow

**art: Alex Schomburg**

*Miss Snow reports that "Slush" is only the second SF story she's tried to write and the first one she's tried to get published. She is a landscape architect by profession, and lives and works in the central Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Current living companions include one dog, three cats, and about seventy-five assorted lizards.*



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It was almost two years ago, but I still remember groaning when I walked into the office that day. I had taken a week's vacation and the world had fallen apart, just as I always suspected it would under those circumstances—the world, in this case, being the editorial offices of *Beyond Tomorrow Science Fiction* magazine.

Three of our four part-time readers had been sick, and every would-be writer from Bangor to Escondido had decided to send us a story. Del Varossa, my assistant editor and alter-ego, was buried behind a pile of manuscripts. He returned my groan with interest.

"How was the vacation?"

"Great. How's work?"

"Lousy. Need you ask?" He gestured at the desk-long rack that was our slush pile. "Take your turn, friend. We're behind."

We certainly were. The slush pile contained all the unsolicited manuscripts we had received of late. It was arranged more or less chronologically, and some of the stories had been there over a month now. That was against all our editorial policies and good intentions and the like. Usually our readers go through the pile first and toss all the stories that should have been sent to *True Confessions* or *Stag* instead of us. As it was, Kim was the only reader working so I took off my coat and grabbed a piece of the pile.

I really enjoy it—all the stories, new, old, bad, indifferent, or worse. And occasionally, just often enough to keep me from losing all my hair, a gem. Something that is totally new, good, and *right.* Right is the only word for it really: a concept so convincing that you say to yourself, "That's the way it's going to be, that's the way it has to happen. . . ."

Well, I didn't find it that day but Kim did. She is a City College student: young, smart, nice, and crazy about science fiction. Most of our readers are. They have to be, considering what we can afford to pay them. Anyway, Kim knows enough about SF to tell the difference between good and indifferent so I sat up when she brought the story over. (I also sat up because she is young, nice, pretty, etc.)

"Hey, Mr. Sholte, I think this one has really got something. Never heard of the guy before, though. It's hard SF—physics—so I thought you ought to take a look at it."

I was *Beyond*'s resident physical science expert, having acquired a B.S. in physics in the distant past. I kept up with things as



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much as possible in order to be able to spot the difference between speculative and just plain silly. So I thanked Kim and read the story.

It was good. Right, even. A neat little tale about a very novel way to dispose of nuclear reactor waste. Clever; and it had enough characterization to keep the story alive while getting the science across. I liked it. Good hard SF is not easy to come by.

"Del, have we got room for a hard piece, about 7,000 words, on nuclear reactors?" I didn't want to pick up a reactor story if Del had just bought six last week.

"Yeah, sure. We could use a hard piece. I'm getting tired of the end of the world as seen by paranoid drug addicts."

"God. Where did that come from?"

He gestured at the pile. "Where else?"

So we took the reactor story and sent a check to Ansel J. Shaw. We also sent a letter asking to see more stories, please.

We didn't get any more stories; but several months after that issue came out, I got a call from Bill Ridenbaugh. Dr. Ridenbaugh, that is. Physicist, engineer, musician, and—occasionally—writer, Bill is one of the six or eight smartest people in the country, in my humble opinion. He is also a good friend and one of *Beyond*'s toughest critics. He can pull the scientific rug out from under an otherwise good story faster than anyone else I know. He called to say that he wanted a talk and a drink with me, not necessarily in that order. I agreed and prepared myself to defend seven months of editorial choices.

When I showed up at the bar, however, he turned the tables on me.

"Did you know you published a winner back in October?"

"Which one?" I asked, optimistically.

"That story by Shaw on reactor wastes—remember? Very good stuff."

I grinned a little into my drink. I don't get praise out of Bill very often. I remembered the story very well.

"In fact," he continued, "it was more than good. It's possible. I've just spent four months proving it. It will take four or five years to get the technique worked out and into production, but you're going to see that one happen, Alec."

That was a thrill at any time, whether it was my story or not. It isn't often that you see a human mind reach out and say, "This could be," and another mind take the idea and say, "This will be."



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I congratulated Bill.

"I gather this is not a secret any longer?"

"No," he smiled. "The findings are due to be published in a week or so. You're free to pass it on."

"I thought the author might like to know."

Bill ordered another round and nodded. "Actually, that was why I wanted to get in touch with you. I would like to talk to this Shaw. After all, he may have other ideas running around. And I'm curious to know what his background is. He would almost have to be an engineer or a physicist to come that close to the thing. If he is one, though, why didn't he work out the idea himself?"

"Maybe it was only a guess—or perhaps he's not in the position to do his own research."

Bill snorted into his drink. "If he suspected it was possible he would have passed the idea on to someone else to do the research."

I grinned, "Well, he did pass it on, didn't he?"

Bill had to laugh at that. "Maybe, but *Beyond* is not what you would call normal scientific channels. Anyway, I want to see what he thinks of this."

So we toasted the unknown Mr. Shaw and agreed to meet at the office the next morning.

Ansel Shaw lived in upstate New York, according to our records. He had cashed his check and written no more stories. At least not for *Beyond*. Maybe he was busy doing research.

Bill called information for Shaw's number and got nowhere.

"Must be unlisted. It's only a two-hour drive, Alec; want to take a day off?"

I looked at the slush pile overflowing onto my desk, filled with unknown awfuls and Ansel Shaws. I decided it would wait a day.

It waited longer than a day. Bill and I returned late that night and headed back to the bar.

There was no Ansel Shaw.

There were no records of him in Renfield and apparently never had been any. It was a small community, and someone should have known the clever Mr. Shaw. No one did. He had rented a Post Office box for three months, apparently for the sole purpose of sending his manuscript and receiving his check. Then he disappeared.



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Three hours in the bar and we had maybe ten theories on the nature and motives of Ansel Shaw. My latest suggestion was an itinerant nuclear physicist who was both anti-establishment and paranoid, thereby unable to do his own research and unwilling to take credit for it.

Bill didn't even bother to snort at that one.

"Alec, do you remember a story in *Far Worlds* a couple of years ago—it was about a recombinant DNA project. It was just when that research was beginning to be noticed by the public."

"I don't memorize the competition that well, but I think I remember a story. Why?"

Bill was staring off at a blank corner of the bar. He looked uncomfortable.

"It started off like a typical disaster story. Research project combining lower plant and animal genes goes amok. Produces new creature with animal-like protein structure and a vegetative reproductive process. Of course the thing escapes and starts seeding like crazy and taking over the countryside because it has no natural enemies. The usual plot and pretty silly, I thought. But it was well written so I finished it. It took an interesting twist at the end. Scientists learned to control the thing and found that it was a terrific food producer. It could be grown like a field crop and produced an animal protein. The answer to your prayers in a famine—or a place like India. As I said, I thought it was pretty silly at the time. On the other hand it did alert a lot of people to some of the hazards of that kind of research. Me included.

"But now they *are* working on it, Alec. I've got a friend doing recombinant research at Harvard. I was the one who showed him the story in the first place. He thought it was pretty crazy too, at the time. He doesn't anymore. It will be a while, but he thinks that they will eventually be able to create something that will serve the same purpose as the monster in the story.

"The story gave him the idea, you see."

I saw. I swallowed a lump that was not an olive and asked, "Who wrote it?"

"I can't remember the name. It wasn't our friend Shaw, though. It was someone I had never heard of before—and never heard of since, either."

I wished they would turn up the heat in the bar. It was suddenly awfully chilly.

"How many others do you suppose there have been?"

"I don't know," said Bill setting his drink down with a click,



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"but you know the editors and the stories, and I know of at least some of the research. Let's find out."

We found out quite a bit before Bill become so tied up in the development of his reactor-waste disposal system that he had to drop his end of the investigation. Quite a bit or nothing at all depending on how you looked at it.

I found likely stories and Bill flagged the ones he felt were suspicious. By harassing my fellow editors, I found that all the stories had come from their slush piles. First stories by unknown writers. First and last.

None of the authors I tried to trace existed.

The stories themselves were varied in character and style. It seemed unlikely that one person had written all of them. On the other hand, they had several things in common. They were all good enough to be published. They were all hard SF, based on almost-current technology. And they were all aimed at solving some of our worst current problems.

They were all good stories—the kind that stick in a corner of your mind where you keep stumbling over them. And each time you do you tell yourself, "That's a good idea. It's *right*. That's the way it ought to work. In fact, why not?"

And, if you are a scientist, you proceed to find out why or why not.

Somebody out there is helping us along.

But who, and why? Del and Bill and I have speculated until—well usually until we're more than somewhat drunk, and haven't agreed on a theory yet. Someone is feeding us some damn good ideas. Del originally suggested an outside power with a political interest in seeing U.S. technology pushed ahead. But if they know that much, why bother with us? And Bill pointed out that science fiction is very popular in Russia—and elsewhere. You could probably make a nice profit on the black market over there with a suitcase full of our back issues. At any rate, SF seems to be pretty universal among the people with the training and technology to use the ideas that are coming through.

And besides, where are the weapons? I haven't seen a military application come through the slush pile yet. There are anti-pollution devices and alternative energy sources and some clever variations on existing social systems which might improve the world's distribution of food, water, and wealth.

I think someone is saving our lives.



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Bill, being an optimist, believes that some advanced souls Up There are doing it out of the kindness of their hearts. Or the preservation of intelligent life, the furthering of Galactic civilization, and all that.

Well, maybe. On the other hand, though I've read enough stories about that sort of thing, I find it hard to believe in the flesh. I have the feeling that nobody invests this much effort in something without expecting a return out of it, if only good feelings.

And this operation is rather extensive for *just* good feelings.

Bill calls me a militaristic pessimist, but I wonder if someone out there, a next-door neighbor so to speak, is gearing up for trouble. Your theory is as good as mine at this point. But the day we do start getting weapon stories, I'm going to start watching the sky and *worrying*.

Meanwhile, all we can do is wait and wonder if we are all crazy or not. At least for once I am in the best position to find out what is going to happen: I know where the answers are going to show up. I'm down at the office at six every morning, and Del isn't much later.

No half-pay reader is going to weed through that slush pile before I've seen it.

## THIRD SOLUTION TO HOW BAGSON BAGGED A BOARD GAME
## (from page 63)

If the number of pebbles at the start of a game is even, the game must end in a draw no matter how it is played. No even number can be the sum of an even and odd number, therefore a game beginning with an even number of pebbles will end with both players holding an odd number, or both holding an even number.

I am indebted to Frank Tapson, Exeter, England, for inventing and sending me his delightful geometrical version of this old take-away game. A slightly different version of the game appears in Tapson's book, *Take Two!: 32 Board Games for Two Players* (London: A. and C. Black, 1977).



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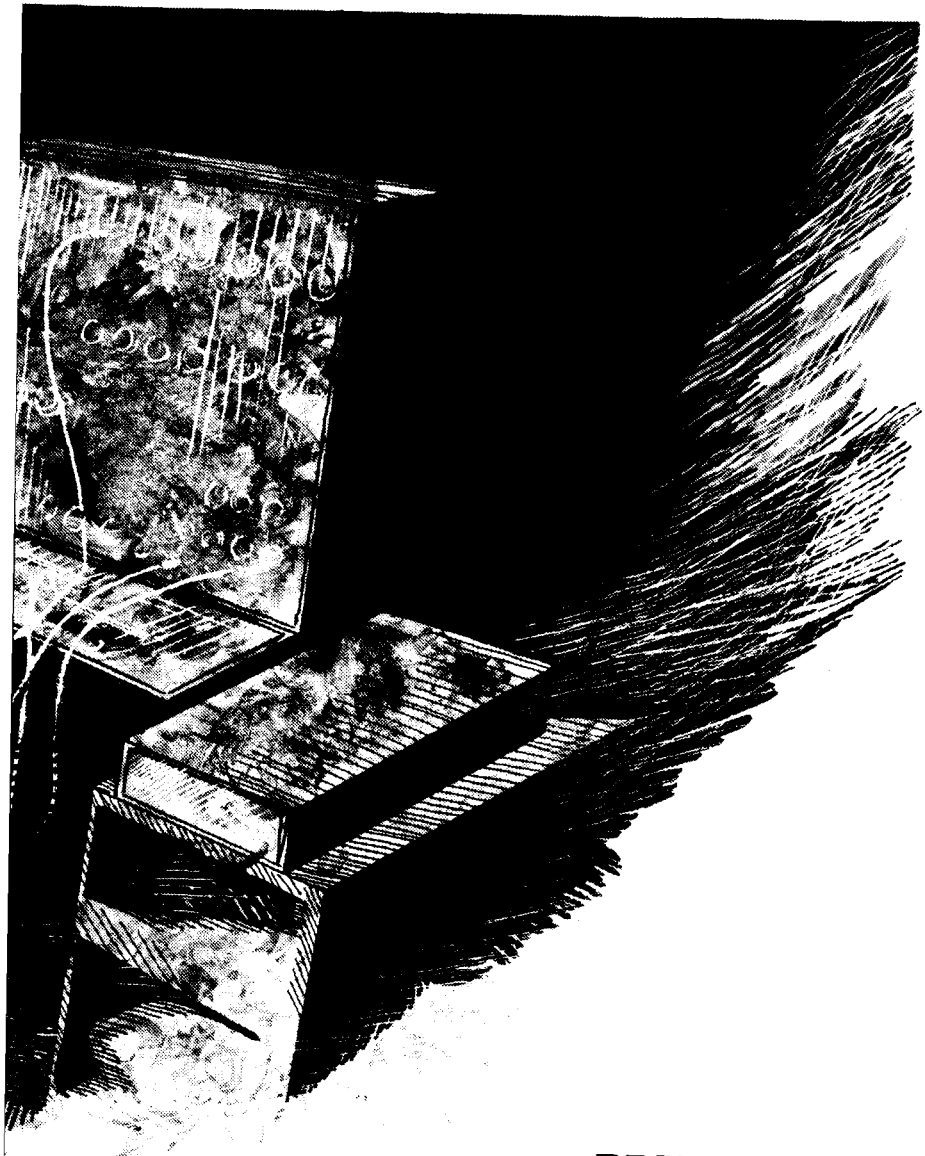

# PRIME CRIME

by Milton Rothman

art: Freff



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*Dr. Rothman has been spending his working time teaching everything from freshman physics to electronics to quantum mechanics. Time in betwixt is spent calculating what happens on a rotating satellite, how much energy it takes to go into space, and other matters that find mention in this story. Some fascinating hours have been spent during the past year doing an experiment trying to see what happens to single photons when they go through a half-silvered mirror. There'll be more on that soon.*

12/22 — 1800

Bored eyes lazily scanning the video readout came to a sudden halt. Leo Renninger leaned forward in the swivel chair as though to impale the terminal upon beams of invisible force from his pale blue eyes. His flat-cut grey hair bristled.

Renninger read the line once more and there was no doubt about it. Comparing the failure rates of the fifteen computer sections during the past year, Biology stood out like a sore thumb. Up 100%, while the others had remained essentially unchanged.

Renninger's right hand drummed on the desk for a moment, then moved to the keyboard and tapped out the Maintenance code.

Two seconds for reply, and the green luminous letters flashed, MAINTENANCE DEPARTMENT CLOSED FOR THE EVENING. PLEASE LEAVE YOUR MESSAGE. IN CASE OF EMERGENCY CALL . . .

Oh hell. Renninger glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost six.

DONOVAN CONTACT RENNINGER FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, he typed. URGENT.

How urgent he didn't know. But just try to get somebody at this hour, three days before Christmas.

Oh hell. Again. And double damned. He stood up in a rush, shoving his chair across the room. He was due for dinner with Sandy in a half hour.

He paused at the front door in his rush out of the building. The spectacle of the rings of lights curving out and over in the eve-



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ning sky of satellite Lagrange brought a sudden rush of feeling to his chest. At this time of year multicolored lights twinkling in scattered arrays reminded him of Christmas trees, of years back on Earth with a family no longer in existence. At this time of year buried memories exhumed themselves.

He sighed and fingered the small package in his pocket. It was time he found himself a permanent relationship again. He knew Sandy would like the diamond. It was a good one. It was one of the few things you could bring up from Earth without paying more for transportation than for the item itself.

12/22 — 1900

To Noah, Paula, and nine-year-old Joshua Pike, Christmas was family time. The satellite interior at nightfall, always a breath-taking sight, began to come alive with scintillations of lights stretching along the axis and circling the circumferences. Filters on the light slots cut the solar radiance down to a dusky rose and then to a deep, dark blue, so that within the cylindrical satellite habitat there was a normal rhythm of night and day.

As the end of the year approached, the standard street lighting began to be supplemented by strings of tiny, twinkling, multicolored bulbs, and even the hub of the satellite—the hollow tube that stretched along the axis from one end to the other—was entwined with a garland of tiny lights. It felt to Noah Pike like living in the center of a Christmas tree.

To Joshua, first child born on the satellite, Christmas trees were made of scrap aluminum and colored plastic. And once a year Santa Claus could be seen fleetingly in his glider swooping about in the low-gee region near the satellite center, a kilometer up. He didn't quite understand how all this had gotten started, but was enchanted by it, nevertheless.

To Paula, Christmas was time for the continuation of traditions transplanted from Earth. The machine shops and parts bins were scoured for recycled materials. Evenings were spent secretly making gifts.

For on Lagrange there were no department stores. Manufacturing was strictly utilitarian and the cost of bringing luxuries up from earth was out of range of all but the wealthiest.

As Noah had warned Paula when they had emigrated: "All of life on the satellite will be conditioned by one simple but ruthless



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fact, based on the most fundamental laws of nature. To bring any object, living or dead, from Earth to the satellite requires a certain amount of energy. And energy costs money. It's a simple problem, and when you work it out you find that to move one kilogram of matter from Earth to Lagrange costs at least two hundred dollars *just for the fuel.* Add to that the cost of the vehicle and the rest of the equipment and your bill skyrockets out of sight."

On this night, as the family cleared the dinner table, Paula signalled Noah with her eyes, saying, "Why don't you go with Joshua to the concert, and I'll go over to Joanne's for the evening."

Noah grinned. He liked the feeling that she was going to spend time making something for him.

The walk to the park was easy. Joshua, all legs and hair, trotted alongside Noah. Noah wondered if the time spent in zero-gee caused elongation of the body. Watching the bands of lights curling over to meet at the antipodes, he made a mental note to see if it would be feasible to provide seasonal changes in the interior lighting.

As Director of the Lagrange settlement, Noah Pike was responsible for introducing little touches that made the place livable. The first years had been sterile nightmares. Even though men and women came up from earth to spend their life in serious pursuits—research, zero-gee manufacturing—the stark black and white atmosphere was deadly to everyday living. Color was needed. Live green most of all.

A pet project had been the music park, an opening circled by evergreens and tropical plants. The horticultural club fussed fanatically over the bordering flowers. Admittedly, no professional musicians existed on Lagrange; the population of two thousand plus was not enough to support a crew of live entertainers, let alone concert artists. For music they had amateurs with their guitars and flutes, and in the park there was the one really good audio system on Lagrange. Everyone had their own tapes at home, but few individuals could afford the massiveness of first-class loudspeakers and amplifiers.

Early for the concert, Noah and Joshua sank down on the soft grass near the center of the amphitheatre. With his big head of rumpled hair and closely trimmed, curly brown beard, Noah resembled a shaggy bear contemplating the flowers, cub at his side. He nodded briefly at the man already in place next to Joshua.



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"Good evening, Mr. Pike."

Pike felt at a disadvantage and searched his mind for the man's name. Ernie . . . ? Yes. Ernie something.

"Good evening, Ernie. Nice night for a concert."

Ernie laughed silently. "It's always a nice night for a concert up here, Mr. Pike. You take good care of the weather."

It had never been known to rain on a concert night. Or any other night, for that matter. This small joke was as much as Ernie allowed himself. A small man with short, sandy hair and no distinguishing features, he was known to Pike only as a familiar face at the weekly concerts. Beyond that, nothing.

A guitarist fitted himself to a stool on the stage and the music began. Jack Lowrey had, obviously, been practicing, and the results showed.

The guitar pleased, but Pike missed hearing live piano.

The only piano they could get was on tape, re-recorded from earth. Tonight's treat was the latest Silbermann recording, notes issuing from the big loudspeakers like machine-gun bullets in cascades almost too fast for the ear to resolve.

There are some things that the ordinary mortal cannot do, no matter how hard he tries, no matter how long he practices. One of these things is playing the Mephisto Waltz in a manner even approximating that of the legendary Silbermann.

Halfway through, Pike's attention was jarred by a wriggling nine-year-old: Joshua, jerking from side to side on the grass. As he stared into some private infinity, his hands writhed like molten talons. Alarmed, Pike reached over and grasped the boy's arm.

"Son, are you all right?"

Joshua turned rigid, scowled in red-faced anger at the interruption, and slumped back to the ground. The music finished in a violent climax that tore the piano apart.

Pike blew air out of his lungs. "Just incredible!" he marveled.

Ernie shook his head in awe. "Really unbelievable. Too much competition for us."

He turned his head to Joshua, who sat silent and stunned.

"That music really does something for you. You'd like to play like that, wouldn't you? Your father ought to have a piano brought up here."

The boy's eyes opened wide. "Hey, dad, could you get a piano?"

Pike drew back. He had gone through this question a dozen times, and the numbers always came out the same. He threw a



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scowl at Ernie, as if to say *now look what you've started,* and turned to his son with a patient sigh.

"Joshua, do you have any idea how much a piano would cost here? Just to bring it here, to haul it up against the Earth's gravity. You know how much that costs? I'll tell you. The shipping charges from Earth to Lagrange come to about a thousand dollars per kilogram. You know what a thousand dollars is? That's about what I make in a whole week."

Joshua's eyes began to bulge.

Noah Pike continued, relentlessly. "Let's say a piano weighs about 500 kilograms. I'd have to justify spending $500,000 to transport a piano. I don't know where to put it in my budget."

Joshua's face burned with disappointment. "Damn it! Is money the only thing that counts?"

"No. But try doing anything without it. Energy costs money and the cost of energy has to be figured into everything you do."

"Then why not make the piano here, if it costs so much to move it?"

Pike laughed. "Have you any idea of how complicated a piano is, and how many different materials and skills go into making it? On earth it took hundreds of years to build up the whole complex of industries feeding the right woods and wires and plastics to the piano builder. Give us time. We've only been here ten years."

"You don't have to make it the same old way," Ernie suggested. "Instead of ivory or wood you use metal and plastic. Instead of a heavy steel frame and sounding board you use tone generators and amplifiers."

"Then you don't have a piano," Pike objected. "You might have a synthesizer or organ, but it wouldn't be the same thing."

Ernie shrugged. "You have to start somewhere."

A tight little smile emerged briefly on his face, then vanished as he rose from the ground.

Noah Pike watched him as he left. A strange little man. Why had he come to Lagrange?

But then, everybody had a reason.

12/23 — 0900

Leo Renninger sat down at his desk, peace in his heart. Sandy had been agreeable, and it had been a good night.

He had barely made contact with the chair when the phone



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buzzed, Joe Donovan's face appearing on the small screen. Renninger flicked the reply switch.

"Good morning, Joe," he said. "Thanks for returning my call."

"Hi, boss. What's up?"

"I'm asking you," Renninger rasped. "Why the hundred-percent increase in maintenance calls in Biology? I should have been informed."

Donovan scratched his nose. "What maintenance calls? There've been no more than usual."

Renninger scowled. He purred, "Look, my friend, get yourself a readout on the annual statistical survey. See for yourself what the hell's been going on."

Donovan disappeared from the screen while he swiveled to his terminal. In a few moments he returned to the phone, his eyes worried. He licked his lips.

"What you say is true, boss. The statistics show twice as many maintenance calls in Biology than in the other sections. But if you look at the operating log, you find that there is no down time listed for about half of those maintenance dates."

He inhaled noisily. "Looks to me like half of those maintenance calls are fakes."

Renninger digested the information angrily. A premonition of trouble clouded what had started to be a fine morning.

"Donovan, you had better find out what kind of monkey business is going on in your department. I'm coming up to your shop and I want an explanation by the time I get there."

"Yessir." Donovan's startled image faded.

Renninger stood up from his chair and at a brisk pace strode down the long corridor toward the elevator. His figure had kept much of its military posture, even after years at a desk.

Fortunately the car was down and there was no wait. He marched through the door, thumbed the UP button and leaned his elbows against the rail in the far corner of the elevator. The floor pressed heavily on his feet as the car rose upward through the roof and into the outer light surrounded by an open tube of metal and plastic grillwork.

Initially the scene expanding before him had been breathtakingly spectacular. But that had been ten years ago. Now he stared blankly at the concave horizon falling away from him, the swoop and curve of the ground as it looped over to meet itself at the antipodes.

The hollow cylinder of the satellite stretched out before and be-



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hind him. Its ten kilometers of length and two of diameter opened up and out as the elevator sped vertically toward the axial tube. In the early days he had been startled by the press of the coriolis force jamming him against the side of the elevator. But now it was taken for granted as one of the facts of life experienced on a rotating satellite. Streamers of light reflected through slits by external mirrors sliced through the air, illuminating the checkerboard of streets and buildings that went along and around the interior of Lagrange.

The satellite axis was the central tube, four hundred meters in diameter, where zero-gee manufacturing and research activities were located. Filling approximately a million cubic meters of this space were the fifteen sections of the Computer Division, his domain to oversee.

When the elevator slid into its receptacle within the axial tube, Renninger still felt one-fifth nominal earth gravity. Further in towards the axis was the true zero-gee section, a cylinder decoupled from the satellite rotation, resting motionless in absolute space, while the satellite spun about it. To those in Lagrange, this inner section appeared to be a spinning axle within a stationary satellite.

As Renninger entered the Maintenance office, Joe Donovan stood up from his terminal. Disbelief on his face, he pointed to the screen.

"There are the facts. See for yourself."

Renninger sat down, while Donovan pointed with a shaky finger at the column headings.

"See. I'm listing computer down times, maintenance times, and lists of parts withdrawn from stock for repairs. Look. Here, here . . . and here. Maintenance dates and lists of withdrawn parts on those dates. But no indication on the operating log that the computer was actually shut down for repair at those times."

Renninger stared at the screen, his eyes going from column to column, his lips becoming more and more tense.

Finally he exhaled. "Okay. It's clear what's happening. Somebody has devised this clumsy plan to steal electronic parts. It's just a step above straightforward theft from the stockroom. At least that would have been caught at the first monthly inventory. As it is, he files a phony maintenance report and requisitions the parts for repair. That took a year to uncover.

"But look, only authorized personnel go through the computer into Supply. Who's been making all these requisitions?"



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Gloom deepened on Donovan's face. "See for youself. John Bergen on every one. Sound familiar?"

"No. Should I know him?"

Donovan spread his arms. "No, you shouldn't. The name's a phony, too."

"So. Our man's clever enough to get into the computer and forge credentials." Renninger considered just how clever that had to be. Momentary anger flared behind his eyes.

"Well, what the hell?" Donovan leaned back in his chair and laughed. "How far can he get on this hunka tin? All we have to do is to look for a homemade computer built from our spare parts."

Renninger cooled down. "Assuming it's a computer. We don't know what kind of device it might be. If I thought for a moment that it might be a threat to the safety and security of Lagrange, I'd call for an immediate general search of all quarters. But we don't even know what we're looking for."

He came to a decision. "Okay, then. That's what we need. Get me a printout of the missing components. We'll analyze the list for function and deduce what is being assembled. Then we'll decide where to look."

Donovan chewed his lips thoughtfully. "And who's going to do the looking? We don't have any police."

Renninger sighed. "It looks as though we might have to make some. This place has done without cops for ten years. But now the screws are starting to come loose. Progress is being made."

12/23 — 1130

The parts list lay on Renninger's desk, long and baffling. It read like a general catalog: digital registers, memories, multiplexers, logic circuits, oscillators, amplifiers. Computer components predominated, but there was an admixture of items that appeared to have audio or communications functions.

How could he make sense out of this? Why would anybody want to make a communication device? Within Lagrange you could call anybody just by picking up the phone.

But suppose you wanted to make an outside call? And suppose you did not want that call to be monitored? Renninger began to feel a chill coursing down his spine as he swiveled aimlessly in his chair and focused his mind on the possible reason for secret



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communication with the other satellite colonies that circled the Earth. The Russian, the Chinese, the Third World Collective . . . What could be going on?

Growing dread filtered into the passages of his mind. Abruptly his aimless rotation stopped and his hand reached out for the phone switch. The Director would have to be notified.

As Noah Pike's face appeared in the screen Renninger suppressed a faint sense of distaste. The image was too much that of a shaggy bear; more the scientist than the administrator. Renninger's taste ran more to straightness, smoothness, and efficiency.

"Good morning," said the image in the screen. "What's up?"

"I'd rather tell you in person. Can I come over?"

"Right away?"

"Sooner."

Pike's eyebrows raised. "Okay, I'll put off a few visits and will expect you over—approximately instantly."

Even with the pneumatic tube, travel to Pike's office was not completely instantaneous, but as Renninger loped into the room he appeared to have been running continously since leaving the phone.

With a fast look at Renninger's face, Pike decided this was no time for casual chit-chat.

"Okay, lay it out," he said.

Renninger removed the printouts from his portfolio and spread them on the desk in front of Pike. Quickly he explained the discrepancies and the lists of missing parts.

"It's not just the loss of a few thousand dollars' worth of equipment I'm worried about," he said, finally. "It's the fact that somebody on Lagrange is building something in secret. We cannot tolerate any kind of secret activities. Our position is too precarious."

Pike scanned the list in silence, while Renninger sat on the edge of his chair. For a moment Pike hummed to himself, then spoke.

"Let me just think out loud. We have these thefts that have been going on for nearly a year. Question: is there an emergency? What's the probability that something serious will happen during the next day or two?

"Putting it another way, what are the chances that the device being built, whatever it is, has been finished? If it's still in the building stage, then our procedure is simple. We put a flag on the computer to catch our culprit the next time he makes a requisi-



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tion like this again.

"What if he has finished? Then we must catch him before he puts the device into operation. The presumption being that whatever he is doing surreptitiously can't be doing us any good. That is the only safe assumption."

"Under that assumption," Renninger broke in, "I recommend that we institute a complete search of the satellite. Go into every corner. Every apartment. Immediately."

Pike's face slowly grew a pained expression. "There are two things wrong with that idea. First, we don't have a police force. Second, we are still legally part of the United States, and there are constitutional safeguards against unlawful search and seizure. Lagrange was founded as a civilian research establishment, not as a military base, and our scientists take a dim view of violation of their legal rights."

Renninger exploded. "Good grief! You quote constitutional rights when the safety of the satellite is at stake? If you knew a bomb was hidden somewhere, would you wait for a search warrant?"

"If I knew a bomb was hidden on the satellite," Pike replied, "I would take appropriate action. But I don't know that a bomb is hidden. I don't know that there is a clear and immediate danger to the satellite. We can't go charging off and upsetting the entire population because we think there might be a problem."

Renninger stared at Pike in disbelief. He selected his words carefully and coldly. "When you think there is a possible danger, then you prepare for the worst contingency. You cannot gamble with our security."

"Okay." Pike capitulated and began to count off on his fingers. "We'll do the following. First, put a flag on the Maintenance computer to catch the next phony requisition. Second, we get the external maintenance crew to start an immediate search for an unauthorized antenna. If this is a communication device we're dealing with, there must be an antenna somewhere. Third, internal maintenance will search all non-private spaces inside the satellite. Anything connected to an antenna should be not too far from the antenna. Fourth, we call a meeting of the Satellite Executive Board for first thing tomorrow morning. They will have to approve any extended search. In the meantime we intensify the monitoring of radio signals to and from Lagrange. If illicit communication is taking place, we'll catch it in the act.

"Anything else I haven't thought of?"



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Renninger gave grudging respect for the precision of Pike's mind, once nudged off of dead center.

"Short of searching personal quarters, it sounds thorough."

"The maintenance crews are just going to love this, two days before Christmas."

"Every day's a working day up here. In space eternal vigilance is the price of life."

"Amen. Be here for our meeting tomorrow. Make it at nine."

Renninger, having returned to his office, sat back at his desk; fingers drumming the smooth surface quietly. The lids on his eyes lowered as he contemplated an unpleasant fact. There was one more thing he had to do.

From the back of a drawer he removed a small notebook. A page towards the rear disclosed a name and phone number he had not used since coming to Lagrange. With eyes still hooded he punched the number and waited.

It was time his link to Intelligence became activated.

12/23 — 1830

As Noah Pike watched Joshua from the corner of his eye it occurred to him that growing up in Lagrange was not really much fun. The little world had to be more confining than a small town in mid-America. Already Joshua was feeling the constraint of physical barriers.

The boy, slowly eating his dinner, appeared drawn into himself and unapproachable.

"Are you feeling all right?" his mother asked him.

He shrugged. "I'm okay." His eyes kept to his plate, his fork circling aimlessly.

Pike felt his own tension level rising, always the result when Joshua went into his slow, sulky burn. *Look,* he told himself, *it's not your fault you can't bring a piano up here. Don't get guilty.* Still, amidst all the paraphernalia, furniture, games, soil, trees that had been brought up, a piano might have been included.

"What are you doing during school vacation?" he asked, not too probing, not too remote.

"Oh, just messing around with the kids. Finishing up a new game on the computer. I'll be ready to beat you tomorrow."

A flicker of interest crept into his voice and a quick, sly grin rose to his face.



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Volatile was the word, Pike thought. Already, in the past two years, the boy had lived through the space-pilot period, the astronomy kick, the mathematics binge, and the computer programming passion. Was music to be next?

*What are you going to be, Joshua, when you grow up?*

The words formed in Noah Pike's mind, but he clenched his teeth to keep them unspoken. *What you are not going to be is something that requires large crowds of people. You're not going to be a football player or film star, a sailor or a mountain climber. You'll visit Laplace, the twin satellite. You'll travel to other satellites, to the Moon, perhaps to Mars if you go in that direction. Yes, we are like a small town. We can hear a concert pianist on records, watch him on TV, but never will he come here to give a live performance. You may escape to Earth, for falling down is relatively cheap. But once down, returning to Lagrange means either being on official business or possessing a personal fortune.*

Joshua slipped away from the table.

"Where are you going?" his father wanted to know.

"Oh, just out to the park."

And he was gone, his father's eyes following him out the door. *Stop worrying. Probably when the kid grows up he'll be something you never even heard of. After all, when you were a kid, would anybody have believed you'd grow up to become director of a satellite colony?*

12/24 — 0900

By morning the information on Pike's desk was uniformly negative. Search of the satellite skin had turned up nothing resembling an antenna. Search of the interior, still under way, had revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Continuous monitoring of the entire electromagnetic spectrum revealed no unauthorized signals.

The Executive Board filled the small conference room next to Pike's office. Their interpretation of the silence was simple: the mystery device was not yet complete.

"Then," said Pike, "we'll catch our man next time he makes a requisition."

"Not necessarily." Larry Conn, Chief of Psychology, vehemently shook his head. "He's already been warned. Everybody on Lagrange has noticed the search parties and rumors are flying. He'll change his system before ordering more materiel."



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"What do you conclude from your analysis of the components?" Pike asked Renninger.

"No conclusion. We just know that the list contains parts from three kinds of systems—computer, audio, and communication. The closest we can come to a guess is some kind of multiplexed communication system with digital controls."

Renninger scratched his chin in bafflement. "Incidentally," he continued, "not only did our thief appropriate these items by using an assumed name, but he programmed the computer to accept that name as an authorized identity for making requisitions. This means our man really knows his way around the insides of the computer. He's a programmer as well as a technician."

Larry Conn raised his head in interest. "We might locate your man by searching the personnel files for somebody with the skill to put together this kind of gadget."

"A very good thought, Larry," said Pike. "Go to it. Don't spare the bytes."

At the meeting's end, Pike felt less tension than before. He had handed his worries to a committee and the sensation of crisis was slackened. For an hour he cleared away routine business, humming to himself, satisfied that he was doing what had to be done.

His peace crumbled at the phone ring. From Earth, the call was coded and scrambled, of highest priority. Pike stared at the uniformed figure on the screen and felt anger beginning to rise.

"General Rogers here. Division of Intelligence. We have received word that there is a potential security problem on Lagrange. I want to offer our assistance and cooperation."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but may I ask how Intelligence has become aware of our situation?" Pike's voice grated in his own ears.

"We are not free to divulge our sources," the other replied smoothly. "Our only purpose is to ensure that maximum effort is going into the solution of your problem. The security of Lagrange is paramount."

In other words, translated Pike, get off your asses and do something, or else we'll do it for you. It must have been Renninger, that slick sonovabitch, going over his head. . . .

Pike fiercely resented the intrusion of the DOI into the situation. The formation of Lagrange colony had, from the very beginning, set off a many-sided struggle between civilian government agencies, industry, non-government scientists, and the Department of Defense. The outcome had been an uneasy compromise between government and civilians to maintain Lagrange as a



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strictly research and manufacturing station. Evidently Intelligence, not satisfied with this settlement, had infiltrated the ranks; and now if it appeared as though the civilians could not handle their own security problem, the military would come in and handle it for them. In the end, if they had their way, Lagrange would become a military outpost, and there would be band music in the park instead of Bop and Beethoven.

One consequence of that call was authorization to search the residences of all personnel—in particular those with enough electronics education to imply a reasonable presumption of guilt. More of an order than an authorization, it took a morsel of the responsibility from his back, but Pike refused to be consoled. Once he took the irreversible step of instituting a general search, Lagrange would be started down the path toward the kind of state in which any individual right could be eliminated by declaring it was all for the good of the colony.

Besides, it was Christmas Eve.

There had to be some other route to take.

With a quick determination he punched Larry Conn's number. "Larry, I know this is a hell of a time, but can you put in some overtime tonight and tomorrow?"

"Sure. I'm hanging loose."

"You got those names you were going after?"

"Sure. One hundred eighty-nine of them. Either with degrees in electronics, physics, or related subjects, or with experience as technicians."

"Okay. I want every piece of information you can find on those names. Education, hobbies, associations, phone calls to and from earth, anything you can think of."

Conn's eyebrows shot up. "Well, we have psychological profiles on most of the folks, but we're not exactly a secret police. And there's a question of confidentiality."

"Confidentiality be damned," Pike roared. "I have an order to search every apartment on the satellite if I have to. Would you rather have that on Christmas Eve?"

Conn sighed. "Okay, chief. I'll put the material on your terminal and will hop over to your office. Best we scan the stuff together."

Several hours of drudgery got them halfway through the list, at which time Pike became aware of hunger pangs gnawing a hole in his middle.

Conn sat back and stretched his arms. "Well, we've learned a



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lot about our neighbors, but I haven't heard any little bells tinkling in my skull. These are very ordinary people."

"Come home to dinner," Pike said, pushing his chair away from the terminal. "We'll finish the rest later."

Patient Paula had drinks and the table ready. "I ate hours ago with Joshua," she explained as she zapped the food in the microwave oven.

Pike looked around. The small apartment, colorful with prints and Christmas decorations, seemed quiet. "Where's Joshua now?"

"Who knows? Out with his friends. Where can you get into trouble on Lagrange?"

"They'll find a way." Pike grinned to underline the jest, but feared the truth.

As they sat with their coffee Joshua came in. His hair was more disheveled than ever, there was an energy of excitation in his gait, a light in his eyes. Christmas, Noah Pike thought.

"Hi, dad." Joshua's eyes peered with curiosity at the stranger sitting opposite.

"Hi, Josh. Meet Larry Conn. We're doing some night work, trying to solve a mystery."

"Hey, slick. What kind of mystery?"

"A mystery of missing electronic parts pilfered from a crooked computer. Tell me, you and your friends haven't been building a homemade computer, have you?"

Joshua turned away. "Aw, dad, don't be silly. I'm not into that kid stuff anymore."

*Already? What was he into?* Noah's eyes followed Joshua as he moved over to the couch and spread out a sheet of paper. Peering over the edge of the coffee cup, Noah watched Joshua sitting on the couch, eyes intent on the paper in his lap, hands spread on an imaginary keyboard, fingers moving slowly to an inaudible tune.

Damned if the kid didn't look as though he was teaching himself how to play the piano. Unfortunately, this was one passion that could be of absolutely no use to him. Even if he were born with the nervous system of a Horowitz or a Silbermann there was no piano on which he could develop its potentialities. What did he expect to do?

Noah Pike felt baffled over Joshua's new behavior, but soon the main problem returned to his mind and drove out every intruding thought.



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On Christmas morning, while every inhabitant of Lagrange greeted the day in his own way, Noah Pike and Larry Conn sat in a lonely office completing the scan of personnel records. By this time Pike had adjusted to the idea that nothing was going to come of it. The quarry's cover was too well-planned to be disclosed by a simpleminded run through the computer files. No way of knowing what each of the legitimate-appearing phone calls signified.

Pike's eyes hurt. As he massaged them gently with his fingertips he told Conn, "Go home, Larry. But stand by. I'm going to make the big decision this afternoon."

Instead of heading home from the office, Pike found his feet walking him to the elevator. He recognized the symptoms: his body took him to the place where he could think best.

In total gravless condition, in the shimmering light of a million stars pouring through the observatory shell, Pike floated in silence. Earth could be seen in one direction; the twin cylinder of Laplace floated a few kilometers away in another. Spinning in opposite directions, the twin cylinders manufactured their illusion of gravity while avoiding the gyroscopic behavior of a single rotor. Consequently the task of maintaining one end perpetually pointed at the sun was rendered relatively simple.

Enclosed in the transparent bubble, Pike felt acute awareness of the fragile ecology of the satellite, a thin balloon surrounded by the deadly vacuum of interplanetary space. This vacuum left little margin for error, little time for response to crisis. Any misstep could lead to destruction.

He felt squeezed in a vise. If he could not settle the mystery by technical means, then he had to use brute force methods such as general search of the satellite. If he did not do it himself, someone else would do it. Whichever way, the basic character of Lagrange would be changed; its political innocence would be gone forever.

The limited search was a compromise. Search only those you had reason to suspect. That would reduce the matter to 189 invasions of privacy. While, in a sense, that had already been done, now they would be aware of it.

Returning to his office, he set up a conference call with the Executive Board. He waited as the faces flashed on to twelve tiny rectangles on the phone screen and considered grimly that at least now the guilt would be spread around. The search would be



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carried out by the Board members personally, together with assorted department heads and assistants.

The screams of protest came close to blowing the fuses on the phone, but he remained adamant. Incessantly he repeated his argument: "The Intelligence people on Earth are on our backs, and if we don't want them coming up here and taking over, we simply must do this job ourselves. I hate it as much as you do, but if we don't show that we can operate Lagrange in an emergency, we'll be out of power before we've completed another orbit. This is a political issue now."

"But on Christmas day!"

"Yes. Get them while they're all home."

The peaceful brown bear had turned into a snarling wolf. What he hated most was seeing the satisfied, knowing grin on Renninger's face as the conference ended.

12/25 — 1600

Through the emergency intercom Noah Pike's well-known voice filled every room on the satellite.

"Forgive the intrusion on this day, but our emergency requires us to act now. You know of the material stolen from the electronics stockroom. It is imperative that we find those parts, or the device that has been constructed from them. Starting now, teams of searchers will visit 189 selected homes. We ask your cooperation and request that you all remain outside your homes for the duration of the search to ensure that nothing is moved from one apartment to another."

Fourteen pairs of searchers moved out into the streets, where up and down the length of Lagrange astonished men and women stood outside their doors and whispered among themselves. For the first time since the founding of the colony, suspicion crept along the walkways. Neighbors glanced at each other from the corners of their eyes, knowing that one among them had turned out to be a thief. The first crime on Lagrange had been committed.

The logic of the operation was based on the list of stolen parts. Assembled, the package had to be too big for hiding under a pile of shirts. Since the criterion for selecting the 189 names had not been announced, no one could be sure who was going to be searched.



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By midnight it was all over, but puzzled, angry, indignant conversations continued along the streets far into the small hours.

For Pike and the Executive Board there was nothing but exhaustion. Nothing had been found.

They sat about in Pike's living room, gloomily finishing his stock of wine.

Larry Conn groaned in frustration. "Our man has just fallen through the cracks."

Renninger sat stiffly, eyes narrowed, lips compressed.

"We've clearly been looking in the wrong places," he said. "We've been assuming the thing is hidden, that we have to search for it. What if it's right out in the open? Suppose the device was assembled in one of our shops and is sitting there in the middle of all the other electronics equipment. Who would know?"

Pike stared at him. "There's some supervisor who would get his ass in a sling."

Renninger persisted, his voice low, intense.

"We've overlooked so many possibilities that I'm convinced it's hopeless to solve the problem by logic. We must go ahead with the total search of everybody on the satellite. Everybody is suspect."

Pike assented, gloomily. "And paranoia wins the game."

Sleep came hard that night.

12/26 — 0900

Noah Pike wrestled with logistics and conscience. Logistics was mechanics: organizing a search of one thousand and twelve domiciles involved nothing but manpower, time, and strategy. Conscience was tougher, involving broken promises, about the kind of society being forged, where freedom from search could no longer be guaranteed. Best to make a clean breast of it. Explain the risks, the reasons.

Larry Conn called, excitement in his voice and in his eyes.

"I found the cracks!" he crowed.

"Explain that, kindly." Pike felt slow.

"The cracks they fell through. It was my fault. I had pulled out the names of those who came to Lagrange with education in electronics. However, I had not accounted for the possibility that some people might have learned the subject since coming to Lagrange. It turns out there are six of them. Six eligibles who missed the search last night."



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There was a buzzing in Pike's head, a tingling down his spine. He ran his hand through his hair, through his beard. He refused to become hopeful.

"Shoot them over to my terminal," he said quietly.

No particular flavor could be tasted in the first three files. Nothing set them apart from the other technicians except for that one difference: their credentials had come through correspondence courses from earth.

The next one started the bells tingling.

To begin with, the photograph accompanying the file showed a face strangely familiar, and he thought that five years of aging would make it even more familiar. What really set off the alarm was one strange discrepancy in the *curriculum vitae*.

**Name: Ernest Miller.** (Vaguely familiar?)
**Present occupation: Programmer for Biology Division.**
**Age: 35**
**Marital status: single; no particular friend.**
**Education: B.S. and M.S. in Computer Science, NYU.**
**B.S. in Piano and Organ, Juilliard Institute.**
(*Julliard?* Why did he go from Juilliard to computer science at NYU? Computer music, perhaps?)
**Correspondence courses from United College of Electronics, incomplete.**

Questions crowded quickly and tumbled over each other. Why the correspondence courses? Why, indeed, was Miller on Lagrange at all? Was this an escape from a failed musical career?

Pike skipped to the phone records. Facsimile transmission of textbooks and lessons from the school. Copious correspondence—problems and exams. Then an entire collection of calls to someone at the Allen Corporation. What in the world was the Allen Corporation?

After a moment's thought, Pike channeled a swift call to the Library of Congress. Breath held, sitting like a rock, he waited the thirty seconds until the reply unfolded across his screen. As he read it, his brows knitted deep furrows. It made no sense, until bits and pieces of memories began to float and fit together. Then he began to laugh. The more they fit the more he laughed until, doubled over, he could no longer wipe the tears from his eyes.

In this state Leo Renninger found him.

"Are you all right?" It was not clear to Renninger what kind of



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fit had struck Pike.

Pike shook his head, his body quaking weakly. "I'm all right, but I'll never be the same again. My friend, have we just led ourselves into the wrong orbit! Sheer panic, that's all. Just sheer panic. We latched onto a theory and followed it straight into the ground."

"Pike, what the hell are you talking about?" Renninger rasped in exasperation. He was beginning to think the director had stripped his gears.

"I'll show you." Pike got up and led Renninger by the elbow out the door. "Come with me and I'll show you a great wonder."

Pike took the distance to the Biology Computer Center in long strides, humming cheerfully to himself. Renninger followed, resenting the mystery game, conscious of being patronized.

They found the programming section, a cluster of cubbyholes, within one of which nested Ernest Miller.

"Hi, Ernie," said Pike, tapping at the open door. Startled, half-turned in his chair, Ernie Miller appeared about to run.

"Take it easy, Ernie," Pike whispered, gently. "I just stopped by to see if you have something to tell me. Or to show me. When we talked at the concert I didn't know you were a musician. But I might have guessed. Can you show me what you have?"

The relaxation of Ernie's body was so sudden that he appeared to slump in his chair. The faint, tight smile appeared on his lips.

"I was going to show you anyway, Mr. Pike. But with all the excitement going on I got scared. I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

"I understand. Where is it?"

"It's at home. Come on. I'll show you."

"Show us what?" Renninger demanded to know.

Pike grinned. "You'll see."

Miller's apartment was a tiny two-room-and-bath affair. As Pike entered, his eyes made the circuit of the miniature kitchen, the daybed, the table, and the door leading to the other room. Naturally, that's where it would be.

Miller went ahead and opened the door. Pike, peering past his shoulders, obtained a confused impression of a room jumbled with tools hanging from the walls, shelves loaded with tiny boxes, racks of electronics strung with a tangled web of cables. The center of the maze was a box-like affair with a pair of keyboards flanked by rows of switches. On the floor was a sequence of pedals, an enlarged version of the manual keyboards.



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Seated on a bench in front of this contrivance was a small figure with long legs and bushy hair, face sandwiched between a huge set of earphones. From the rear Pike had no trouble recognizing the nine-year-old Joshua, lost in concentration, eyes fixed to a page of music, hands slowly walking over the keys, feet feeling their way among the pedals.

The last bit of the puzzle snapped into place.

"Well, Ernie, I'm not surprised."

Noah Pike entered the room, marveling at the complexity of the installation. "I knew what you had," he said, "as soon as I found out that the Allen people make organs."

Joshua heard the sound of voices, turned around, and his eyes became saucers. "Uh-oh," he said. "The jig's up."

"I've been letting him come here to practice," Ernie Miller explained. "This is a very talented kid. Listen to what he's done in less than a week. Keep playing, Josh."

Miller flipped a switch that allowed the sound to issue from a small loudspeaker in the corner. Slowly shifting harmonies of something pre-Bach smoothly stroked their ears.

Miller grinned in satisfaction. "First time I've had it on the loudspeaker. No need to keep quiet now."

Renninger finally exploded. "So this is what we've been chasing after. Kept us up one night after another. Dozens of people searching hundreds of homes. Upsetting the entire satellite. Not to mention a hundred thousand dollars' worth of components. All for a lousy music box."

Ernie flushed. "I'm sorry about all the trouble. I was going to tell everybody about the organ when I was all finished, but you got on to me before I had a chance, and then I got scared."

"And now you're in real trouble," Pike pointed out. "Grand larceny by computer. You'd have done better to make a direct proposal for a cultural project."

Ernie shrugged his shoulders, glumly. "You said yourself you couldn't justify the cost. I figured I'd be an old man and my fingers would be as stiff as a corpse before I got an okay. My hands were beginning to hurt because I wasn't using them. So I said, build the thing first. Then get approval."

He touched the boy's elbow. "Josh, show them what this thing will do."

Joshua grinned widely and said, "Dad, this is a really neat organ. Listen to this."

His hands flew among the switches, and the loudspeaker re-



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sponded with roars, whispers, pipings, flutings, and other assorted sounds. Ernie listened, entranced, his head cocked to one side.

"The sounds are from real organ pipes," he said. "The memory bank stores the wave parameters and the computer pulls them out on command. It's a standard method."

While Noah Pike watched Joshua play, a new problem insinuated itself into his mind.

"You say Joshua is talented?"

"One in a billion. He's picked up the music so fast it makes my head spin. It would be a crime not to give him the training to use it. I can give him a start and he can get the rest from Earth."

"And without your inspired insanity," Noah said, "your notion to put together this wild contraption, Joshua would never have known what he wanted. Craziness, chance, impulse, they drive us in directions we never anticipated."

Pike turned to Renninger, who had been standing in the doorway with thunder in his eyes.

"Cheer up, old man. At least we'll have Intelligence off our backs now. Our only problem now is explaining all this without looking like a bunch of complete idiots."

"If we're idiots we may as well look the part," Renninger grunted. A chuckle escaped involuntarily and the dour look on his face softened. "Seems to me your problem now is finding room in the budget for this junk pile. And while you're at it find somebody to clean up the wiring. You can't expect Josh to give concerts on a disaster like this."

Pike smiled gratefully. A new view of the future took form in his mind. The well-laid plans for Lagrange were about to give way to unforeseen forces. The organization charts with room only for solid, useful citizens were about to bend and crack as young people would make up their own minds concerning their destinies. The ranks of engineers, technicians, and scientists would become tempered with artists and entertainers. And who was to say which was more useful?

The only prediction he could make for sure was that the next generation would be unpredictable.



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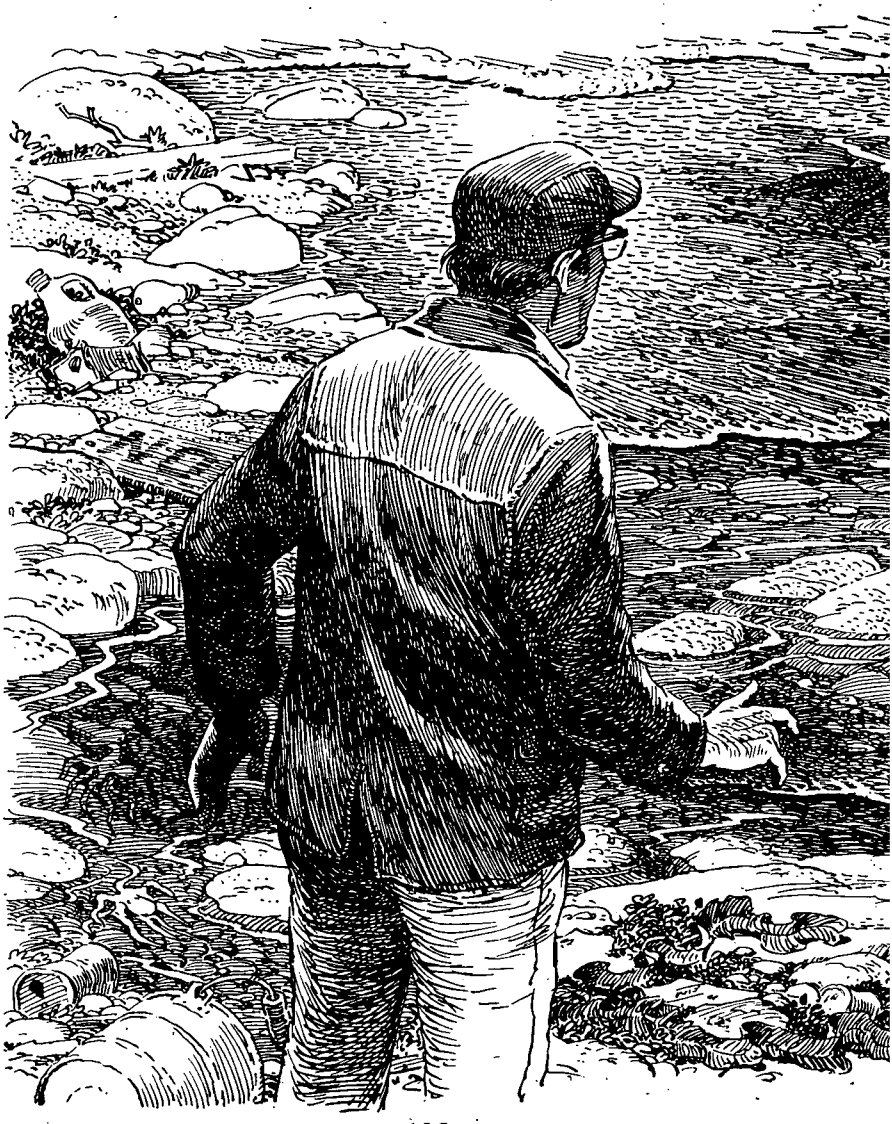
# MERMAID'S KNELL

## by Anne Lear

**art: Frank Borth**





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*The author tells us that she had cheerful and invaluable assistance with some of the technical problems discussed in this story from Dan Warren, M.D.: member of the Red Circle; researcher in toxic gasses; devoté of Sherlock, H.P. Lovecraft, ancient religions, and corpses of all kinds; who claims he knows "dozens of ways to poison people undetectably" and is the ideal dinner partner for one who wants lots of room on both sides.*

The tides run deep and strong around Otter Bay in June, and for this reason the mermaid who washed up onto the tidepool rocks had suffered only slight sea change. She was not nibbled by fish, nor bloated, nor torn by crabs.

She was, in fact, beautiful. Her skin was probably not much paler than it had been in life, and her long red hair was lustrous in the morning sun. Her elegantly tapered lower half gleamed in the water like fluid emeralds. She was still undespoiled by the watchful gulls, who remained dubious and aloof for the moment but would cease to do so when the sun was high and the sea lady began to be the same.

There was a bullet hole in her forehead.

Cold salt water swirled and sucked at Dr. Hazerbedian's boots and mingled the mermaid's hair with shaggy banners of olive kelp, pulling the two into elaborate patterns shoreward and then back out as it withdrew. A very faint, discontinuous haze of blood was scarcely distinguishable among the red strands of hair.

The tide was beginning to turn, Hazerbedian realized, as he checked the water level and made a quick calculation. He must have been standing there for twenty minutes, so stunned by the mermaid's beauty, by her strangeness, and by her appalling lack of life that he had dropped his collecting bucket and never so much as noticed his captives' hasty break for freedom. Octopi—for those were what he had come today in the early dawn to seek—slid over the bucket's edge, plopped into the water by his feet, and jetted for cover, disguising themselves as they went. The professor did not see them.

Like her hair, the mermaid's tail moved with the shallow pulses of low tide, swaying faintly, sinuously, the long, delicate flukes at



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the end forked at an angle across the broad pool where she lay, covering and uncovering the busy life beneath as the waves washed and ebbed.

Dr. Hazerbedian shook his head to clear it of wonder, as he might have cleared his throat to free it of phlegm. Like most people, he had always hoped mermaids existed; but his scientific discipline had curbed even his fantasy and focused resolutely on the killjoy theory that the mermaid legend had derived from lonely sailors mistaking manatees for seagoing women. It had never really seemed likely, all the same, that even a sailor could get *that* lonely. After all, a manatee looks something like a small walrus without tusks, tubby, split-lipped, and whiskered.

A far cry from what lay at his feet. But the water was deepening around those same feet, and it was time to move. There was room in the cooler back at the marine station; and, if Hazerbedian hustled the mermaid into his car quickly, he could probably get her back to the station and under cold cover before anyone was about.

Apparently mermaids in this part of the world were not large. At least the one in his arms as he slipped and stumbled back to shore was about the size, allowing for extra length in the fish tail, of a well-developed ten-year-old human girl. "Emphasis on the 'well developed'," he thought with chagrin, as she slipped in his hold and plastered a neat, cold breast wetly into his right eye. Of course, she might be a small specimen. His mind ran on, as the minds of zoologists will, drifting back irresistibly from time to time to the age-old question about mermaids, a question which his own investigations would shortly solve: could they or couldn't they? He, David Hazerbedian, might very well be the first man to know the answer.

Unless, of course, they could and did.

He stopped short, so short that he nearly tumbled backward down the sandy cliff beneath his burden. Someone else already knew the answer, or at least the mermaid. Someone had put that hole in her head. Someone, by God, had murdered her.

But you don't murder a fish. And this creature was at least half a fish, or some sort of cetacean. But that was the bottom half; and the top half, the half that had the extra hole in it, was either human or looked so much like it as to make no difference.

Only what laws on God's green earth, or rather, in God's blue waters, covered mermaids? Did merpeople have laws? More to the point, did they have guns?



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He thought not. Firearms were obviously impractical under water, as were chemically propelled missiles and air guns. Spear guns of some kind seemed most likely, and that small wound had not been made with a spear gun.

Wounds, actually: a small, round, slightly puckered hole a little above the eyes, and a star-shaped one, somewhat larger, at the back of the neck, both washed clean by the salt sea.

Not stopping to pour the water out of his hip boots, Hazerbedian stowed his strange specimen under a judicious blanket in the back seat of his car, drove by the shortest route to the marine station, pulled up at the back door of the main building there, and made a careful check for other early activity. Luckily, the low tide had been an unimpressive one; and no one else had considered it worth the trouble to get up for. He had the place to himself.

He unlocked the disintegrating outer door, squelched down the hall, and opened the walk-in refrigerator. Various sea creatures squatted and sprawled nightmarishly along the shelves; and a sea lion took up one whole table, the effect being of a chilly, otherworld Turkish bath. It was going to be a little tricky keeping the station's other scientists away from their material; but as senior scholar and head of the station, Hazerbedian figured he could probably get away with keeping the room locked up for a day or two. Anyway, he hoped so.

He retreated down the hall and slopped out into the fog to his car.

Getting the lady into her temporary resting place was mercifully uneventful. Hazerbedian placed her in what he hoped was an easy position and smoothed her hair down over her breasts before he covered her with the old blanket. He felt oddly comforted to realize she would not have been bothered by the fishy smell of it, had she still been capable of being bothered by anything.

He allowed himself the luxury of changing out of his boots and drinking the last of his thermos coffee before he picked up his desk phone and dialed the number of Otter Bay's police chief, Jack Connor.

"Ca-ar," blurred a thick voice.

"Jack?"

"Mmm. Whassup? Wha time's it?"

"A little after five. This is Dave Hazerbedian, and I've come across something you should probably see right away. I'm at the station."

"Now?"



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"You won't regret it. Or, well, maybe you will; but you will certainly find it worth your while. I think we may have to move quickly before the papers get—um—wind of it." Hazerbedian smiled at the thought of the world press's response to an authentic, red-haired, beautiful, murdered mermaid. The discovery was hardly going to be treated in a scholarly manner. Perhaps it shouldn't be, at that.

Fresh coffee was still filtering into a litre flask when Connor's ancient Buick crunched and rattled on the gravel drive outside the lab. The noise cut off and ceased to drown the softer morning sounds: the foghorns calling to each other across the bay, drip of fogdamp from the greybeard Spanish moss, squabble of birds, and the ever-pervading, ever-changing iteration of the sea. Connor knocked perfunctorily and grumped into the room.

"This had better be goddamn important. Where's the coffee?"

Hazerbedian poured a beakerful for each of them, shoved Connor's across the bench, and used the cover of their first sips to collect his nerve.

"Chief, I found a dead mermaid on the rocks this morning." Well, there *were* subtler ways to approach it, but none had come to mind.

Jack Connor said nothing and went on saying it for a long time. If this was a joke, it wasn't funny, not at five-twelve A.M. He checked his watch to be sure. Yep. Five-twelve. A.M. The only other explanation was that Dave had suddenly gone mad; and that wasn't funny either, at any time of day. He looked all right, whatever that meant, spoke with his customary, slightly nervous cadence. Connor sipped his coffee and waited.

"Please don't look like that. You remind me of things I wish I hadn't been caught at."

"Who, me? I'm not looking any way at all. I'm just sitting here, enjoying my morning coffee and wondering why a public servant who has worked until all hours of the night (this was not true, but never mind) should be woken out of a sound sleep to listen to bedtime stories. It isn't logical."

Hazerbedian poured again. "Chief, don't listen to what I say. Don't try to figure anything out. Just come with me for a minute. Please?"

Connor gave him a thoughtful look, frowned perplexedly, and rose to lumber after him down the hall.

Hazerbedian himself was assailed by sudden doubts concerning his memory and sanity. Either there had never been a mermaid



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at all, or if there was one, she was going to have vanished by the time they got to the cooler. This was all going to be very embarrassing, at best. He wished he had simply taken the damned mermaid over and dumped her on Connor's front porch, then rung the front doorbell and hidden behind a bush.

Assuming there *was* a mermaid.

But when, after several weeks of trailing down the endless hall, they reached the cold room and Hazerbedian pushed open the heavy door, there she was, her long tail drooping almost to the floor from under the old blanket. He pulled the blanket back and rejoiced to see Connor's jaw drop to his badge, then faltered a little as he looked ruefully at the delicate, dead face.

As for the chief, he was busy with a quick succession of ideas. This was a practical joke. No, it wasn't. Yes, it was. No, that was a mermaid, all right. But it couldn't possibly be, and what the merry military hell was Hazerbedian playing at anyway? Nothing. That, by any set of gods you cared to name, was half girl and half fish, or dolphin, or whatever. And both halves were dead. At last his feelings found a vent.

"What in hell do you think you're doing, moving a body from the scene of a crime?" he bellowed.

"Moving a body from the scene of a crime? I . . . I guess I didn't think of that. The tide was coming in, and I wanted to get her back to the station before anyone saw her, and . . . *what* crime, Jack?"

It was Connor's turn to look startled. "What crime? Murder, of course. She's been shot through the head!"

"But dammit, she's not human! Unless mermaids come under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, it can't be a crime to kill her." Hazerbedian looked down. "It may be a sin, but it's no crime."

The two men stared at each other across the body of the mermaid, law and science squared off over fantasy. Jack Connor said the only reasonable thing.

"Well, I'll be God damned."

After a little more head scratching and another cup of coffee back in the lab, Connor left for the beach. Hazerbedian padlocked the cold room and headed for a shower, a shave, and breakfast.

The mermaid's inlet reached in just where Cliffway, the main thoroughfare of Otter Bay, ended at Beach Drive; and a convenient shoulder overlooked the water. Connor parked on the shoulder, walked around to the beach side of the old car, and scrambled



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down the low cliff to the rapidly narrowing beach.

At the edge of the water he stopped, looking in an unfocused way for something useful. Anything odd, anything that did not belong to the normal life of the inlet could have meaning for him to read, if he were sharp enough. He had no idea what it might be.

The tide had not yet completely flooded the high pool in which the mermaid had grounded, and all the evidence of the beach corroborated Hazerbedian's story. The professor's footprints were the only ones in the wet sand; and they were just as they should have been, shallow going out and deep coming back. The abandoned bait bucket was rocking gently in a filling pool. Connor picked it up, checking to see that there were no animals trapped inside.

The inshore pools showed no unusual features, except for two long red hairs trailed across the surface of the one. Connor fished these out and put them into a small envelope on which he noted the time and place. There was little else to see. Shore crabs scuttled; eel-like blennies flipped, just as they always did, when the chief turned over curtains of algae.

At the cove's outer edge, waves broke on the ring rocks, sending crashes of spray cliff-high; and in the basin, dark waters surged against each other, submerging the tiny tidepool worlds in violence against which their inhabitants clung for presumably dear life. One wave, swollen by the advancing tide, poured over the rocks and rushed so quickly toward the shore that Connor had to backstep in a hurry to keep from getting soaked to the ankles. As it retreated, it left a rose on the sand, a few inches from his shoetips.

A white rose it was, not yet full blown, bruised but not wilted. It looked strange among the alien wrack of red and green algae and the rubbery coils of kelp. The chief picked it up, wondering if girls from the sea loved roses as much as the girls he knew did. A white rose, he felt, would look charming in the sunrise hair of a girl with pale green skin.

Now where would a mermaid get a rose?

Connor turned and climbed back to his car.

Back in his office under Otter Bay's Town Hall bells, he first instructed Sergeant Millie Grenfell to see that Officers Lavine and Candace kept an eye on the cove for the rest of the day and then telephoned Patty Huntleigh, the small, doe-eyed, ferocious county coroner. He did not explain, just asked if she could take on a hurry-up autopsy and keep it strictly out of sight for the time



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being. Dr. Huntleigh snarled for a while about all the work she already had on hand, but she recognized the note of unusual excitement in Connor's voice and agreed.

Would she have any objection to working with a local biologist? Not if he or she were any good, but why? She'd understand when she saw the body. Could Connor get it over to Salinas by himself, or should she sent the meat wagon? No trouble, he could manage. All right then.

The chief called Hazerbedian to give him directions to the coroner's office. There was no need for him to go along, as Hazerbedian figured he could get his find there easily enough alone. Good.

Connor tried to put magic and marvel from him, as he settled down to the morning report. There had been a fight last night at Jacko's. It had happened on Sergeant Grant's shift; and Grant had dealt with it efficiently, as always, so that all the chief had to do was to read over the report and approve it and the related actions. Finster again, from the *Aranha*. That one, amiable as a gargantuan puppy dog when sober, managed to get into every fight in town when he was drunk, which he was most nights when he was ashore. A few days on the county were probably in order next time, although Connor had already let him out of the holding cell downstairs this time, hungover and apologetic as usual.

Bob Boyd was another problem entirely; and Connor had already had the sheriff's men take him to Salinas, charged so far with four counts of assault with a deadly weapon. Boyd probably watched too many old movies, as his technique of smashing the bottom from a bottle was right out of Hollywood, but he was no amateur when it came to using the jagged edges on people he didn't like. As nearly as Connor could tell, Boyd didn't like anyone, but he had been worse lately.

As a matter of fact, it had been a good thing Finster was on hand and drunk last night at Jacko's. Two men off the *St. Brendan* had been seriously cut up, as had Jacko himself when he stepped in to save his barmaid. She had been slashed deeply in the arm she put up to protect her face, and it was a terrifyingly broad pool of her own blood they fished her out of at the end of the fight. Indeed, it was this last phase of the battle that had met young Finster's eye as he arrived at the bar; and he responded with a stranglehold so speedily applied that Boyd was nearly throttled before the famous Finster roar had died on the beery air.

No one seemed to know just what had started it all, which was



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not unusual. However, for once there were not even lingering recollections of conversational rancor. The three fishermen had simply been yarning away about the sea and its denizens, exactly as their ancestors had been doing since humans first set out in reed boats and coracles; and Boyd had blown up as suddenly as a Pacific squall.

Maybe his brain was turning into the alcoholic mush he had been courting for years. Great. Another homicidally demented drunk was just what the town needed. After all, old Milt Laval had been dead for six years now; and maybe things had been too peaceful in the eyes of some celestial balancer.

Connor sighed and lumbered out to the parking lot. In one of the town's two black-and-whites he drove around town for an hour, making the usual random tour of business and residential districts. Traffic through the antiquated streets was no more snarled than usual, and there were blessedly few calls.

He picked up the mike, thumbed the SEND button. "Millie."

(Crackle. Sssssppppttttt.) "Chief?"

"I'm going fishing for a while. Call me if you need me or if the autopsy report comes in."

(Wheeeeeeooooooeeeee. Crackle.) "... ll do, Chief." (Snap.) "... fun."

Huntleigh and Hazerbedian did not actually divide the mermaid in half for the autopsy, but they did exercise complementary abilities in it. As a comparative neurologist, Dr. Hazerbedian was more than competent to deal with almost any brain; and, as a specialist in marine life, he had certain advantages in the present situation. However, he had little knowledge of forensic medicine and none of the coroner's experienced perception of the wrongnesses that point to crime, the ways in which natural death is different from death by even clever violence.

There was little trouble getting the body into the morgue. Hazerbedian took Patty Huntleigh out to his car and lifted the blanket enough to show her the nature of their subject. They agreed it would look a trifle strange for him to carry a blanket-wrapped corpse in his arms, to say nothing of the chance of trailing an escaped long tail down the hall if the blanket should happen to slip.

Dr. Huntleigh, whom it took much more than a dead mermaid to rattle, nipped back inside the building, re-emerging a moment later with a gurney. The two waited until no one was in the area,



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quickly slipped the mermaid out of the car and onto the cart, whipped a county blanket over her, and belted her firmly into place, tucking the end of the blanket under the tail fins. After that, it was easy enough to wheel the gurney up the ramp, through the door, and into the lab which was the coroner's private preserve, guarded from interruption by the notoriety of her temper.

Even Dr. Huntleigh was moved enough by the wonder of this strange subject to put off for a bit the gorier functions of her trade and dwell for a time on the obvious externals. Both scientists were fascinated by the gills lying along each side of the neck, closed now and visible to the casual eye only as tiny slits. They were more charmed than surprised by the delicate, transparent webbing between the fingers but were much interested to discover that it was retractible, like that of an octopus, and could be drawn up nearly all the way to the knuckles. They had not expected to find a stabilizing dorsal fin but felt it made sense for a marine creature of such unusual lines to have one. At present it lay collapsed at the base of the spine, having no function out of water, and would not have interfered with a sitting posture, had its owner still possessed any desire to sit. The flukes themselves were horizontal, like those of whales and dolphins, but much more elongated and finned like fishtails, fragile in appearance and probably more efficient for flexibility than for speed.

The skin of the nether portion was a brilliant green, unscaled, iridescent but fading fast, rough, and taut over powerful muscles. The upper skin was smooth, soft, and much paler, faintly iridescent like the lower. "Pearly," thought Hazerbedian, "if you can imagine a pearl with hints of green instead of pink in it." There was pink, however, or rather a deep red, in the retractable nipples of the small breasts.

As for the ancient question, she could. Marine mammals are an amorous lot, and this one was no exception. Not only could she; but she had, and recently. Patty took a sample of the residue and set it aside.

Going below the skin, they permitted their professional, and natural, curiosity some leeway, working through such interesting adaptations as a light, porous skeleton, a layer of subcutaneous fat surprisingly thick in such a slender creature, and a dual respiratory system elegantly developed for instant changeovers from water breathing to air breathing, no mean improvement on her relatives' need to hold their breaths.



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The circulation was both more complicated and simpler than that of humans. A veinous complex was structured to switch its load from lungs to gills and back again, according to the active source of oxygen. However, the descending aorta did not divide, as it must to service two legs, but carried blood down the tail in one neat channel.

The reproductive system was surprisingly humanoid, although there were some differences, for example, the ability of the vagina, as of the other body apertures, to seal itself against watery intrusion.

"Damn." muttered Huntleigh. "I wish we could get a look at a male."

At last they set to work on the head. There were some surprises there; for instance a completely non-humanoid arrangement of sinuses, in which a system of sacs and ducts baffled the coroner entirely. Hazerbedian recognized it as similar to the click-speech apparatus of dolphins but noted fascinatedly that vocal cords were also present, which is not true in dolphins. A remarkably versatile species, if species it was and not just one amazing mutant.

The brain was, or had been, pretty much humanoid, although not entirely so. The bullet had done comparatively little damage, although its expansion wave had compressed and partly pulped the tissue between its point of entry in the forehead and its exit at the top of the spine. Unfortunately for both the mermaid and the doctors, it had shattered the *medulla oblongata,* that part of the brain which controls autonomic functions such as breathing and heartbeat, including that marvellous dual respiratory system. It must have killed instantly.

"That was some shooting," said Huntleigh viciously, annoyed with herself for being unable to approach this body with her customary *sang froid.*

Eventually they put most of the parts back where they had found them and slid the former sea lady, now reduced to a cadaver, into a cold drawer which the coroner locked. A much more detailed dissection would follow shortly, probably with other biologists present; but the immediate needs of the autopsy had been served. Huntleigh promised to get the report out that afternoon, including a copy for Hazerbedian.

At the fishing pier Connor parked in his usual illegal spot, got out of the car, and stood for a moment, allowing himself a pause for undistracted pleasure in his surroundings. The fog had all



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burned off. The sky was bright blue, and the ocean was dark blue, the former laced with birds and the latter ornamented by a pod of grey whales playing off the point, dallying along their immemorial route north from the breeding ground of Scammon Lagoon.

"Stragglers," thought Connor. "Must be just about the last ones." He turned and dug out from the car's trunk his ancient tackle box and casting rod. Leaving the windows open in case Millie should try to reach him, he strolled over to the edge of the deck and sat down to fish and think, as was his wont in trying moments.

Beppo Mencacci was fishing a few places down the pier, and Connor waved to him. Old Beppo, as he was universally known, waved back but knew enough to leave the chief alone. Old Beppo knew practically everything there was to know about everyone in Otter Bay, having come there as a young man from Naples fifty years earlier. He had retired from his family's boat, named *Angela Rosalia* after his long-dead wife, four years ago and now spent his days dangling a line from the pier, enjoying the sun and the toilless sea, birds, red wine, and pretty girls. He was a genial man, deep-voiced, hatchet-faced, with a mop of beautiful white hair and darkly weathered skin.

Connor rummaged around in the tangled, malodorous contents of the tackle box, swore evilly at a lure whose rusty hook had jabbed his thumb, and finally disinterred a dried shrivel of squid which had probably been left there when the box was new. Like many other fishermen, he believed that the ripest bait caught the most fish. Harder to steal too, if it was dried good and stiff.

He attached a hook to the ready swivel, baited it, checked his weights, and cast out, stopping to suck his bloody thumb before reeling in.

Gulls wheeled and screamed over the fish wholesalers' sheds and perched on the tin roofs. The more energetic skimmed the surfline to snatch out little fish flung up into the breaking crests. The more larcenous squabbled with a floating otter for possession of a crab he was trying to eat from his dining-table chest.

Jack Connor wondered if the mermaid had had friends among that swooping, jeering mob, or maybe pets. Perhaps one of the dainty kittiwakes, but Connor could somehow not imagine her in the company of such a roistering robber baron as a herring gull.

Who were her friends, anyway? What was the society of the sea people like, and how did they get along with other marine creatures? Did they migrate like the grey whales, or were they around



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all the time?

He cast and reeled in again. Not a nibble. He sucked his thumb and scowled.

Blood. Salty, like the sea. What was her blood like? Was it red? Probably, unless she had evolved from molluscs, which seemed unlikely. The wounds had been clean when he saw them, and that made sense. If she had died as quickly as a human shot that way would, she wouldn't have had time to bleed much, and the sea would have leached away what blood was near the wounds. He wondered if lividity was going to be any use for judging times or position and decided it probably wouldn't. He hadn't seen any signs of settled blood through the skin; and the continuous motion of the water around her would have prevented it, unless some special physiological factor made a difference. He would have to ask Patty Huntleigh about it, although it would probably be in her report.

The tides were most likely going to be his best guide for timing.

A bright trail of bubbles twenty feet out betrayed a hunting cormorant. Connor watched a spot a few feet ahead of them and was rewarded with the apparently magical appearance of the bird itself. This was something of a triumph, as cormorants, like loons and helldivers, surface and right themselves in much less than the flick of an eye. The water is empty; and then it is occupied by a quietly floating bird, with no noticeable transition.

The cormorant smirked at Connor, turned its fish around to point head down, and gulped the creature into oblivion. Then it pointed itself head down and was gulped by the sea. Just beyond where it had been was a tiny boat.

More precisely, it was a large boat at a distance, but it was coming in fast. Connor thought he recognized the *Three Sisters,* his son-in-law's drag, but Don never came in this early. He turned around to check the harbormaster's flagpole. Nope, no storm flag. He reeled in his line, shaking off well below deck level the spiky, bloody-minded kelp crab that had been working to dislodge his bait and would have settled happily for a finger.

He had time to stow away his gear before the boat reached her unloading dock, but not much to spare. The chief was waiting at the top of the pier ladder as the *Three Sisters* tied up and the four man crew, greenish pale under heavy tans and dirt, scrambled up. There was no catch in the sorting boxes, none in the hold.

Don Morales was too shaken to bother with colorful profanity. "God *damn*!" he said at large, and then repeated to Connor, whom



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he had just noticed, "God *double* damn!"

Connor waited, but Don shook his head. "Come on," he said, and headed toward the land end of the pier, leaving his crew to explain to the furious wholesaler why they did not need the ice hastily prepared for their premature return and why they were not willing just yet to clear the wholesaler's dock and take the boat out around the breakwater and through the narrow channel into the marina.

At the foot of the pier was the Sakura, a small, squalid, Japanese bar favored by commercial fishermen. Don led the way into its noisome interior and jack-knifed his lanky frame into a booth. Connor's eyebrows shot up as the younger man ordered a boilermaker. He himself settled for a plain beer. Don drank little as a rule, being, if anything, a shade too earnest for the chief's taste.

The second shot of bourbon had dropped into its companion beer before Don was ready to talk. "Jack," he said slowly, "when I bought the *Three Sisters* out from old Clemente, I thought I knew everything I'd run into: weather, poor catches, even Russians. Hell, I'd been working out there since I was eight years old." Another long pause, and another boilermaker. "Killer whales, Jack, must of been thirty of the sumbitches. They were all around us, spy-hopping as if they were looking for someone, and bumping the hull. Thank God we didn't have the drag out yet, or they'd have tore it clean off the winch."

Chief Connor was startled, but he felt it explained the boilermakers more than adequately. Under the same circumstances he would have been well beyond three. But killer whales hadn't bothered the boats around Otter Bay in living memory and longer. "They do any harm?"

"No, not really, I guess. Just chivvied us around for a couple of hours. Almost like they were *trying* to scare us. They succeeded."

"How'd you get away?"

"No problem there. After a while they just kind of herded us back home, actually pushed with their heads. Damnedest thing I ever saw. I hate the thought of taking the boat round to the marina, but I like leaving her at anchor even less. Guess I'd best go do it while I've got some of this high octane in me."

They paid their tabs and walked slowly back to the wholesaler's, meeting the Sakura-bound crew on the way. The men were openly relieved to learn that Morales meant to run the *Three Sisters* into the marina by himself.



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Connor checked in on the car radio and went with him, but the short trip was uneventful. However, on the way around they did see several other boats heading in; and when their boat had been settled into her slip and the two men walked up the ramp to the pier again, they learned that the *Three Sisters'* experience had not been unique. Practically a third of the local fleet had run into trouble of one kind or another.

Some nets had been mysteriously damaged and lines cut, and one propeller had been fouled by a thick bed of kelp that should not have been where it was. The killer whale pod had harassed two other boats, and the *San Tomas* had actually lost an entire dragnetful of bottom fish when a giant octopus—"Biggest bastard you ever saw!"—boiled out of it and scared the men half to death at a critical moment.

At first people were simply angry, at the sea creatures for defeating their work and at themselves for being frightened. But days passed, and every boat that left Otter Bay harbor was eventually attacked in some unpleasant manner. No one was hurt; but the attacks got a little rougher every time, until at last one of the crewmen of the *St. Brendan* was actually knocked overboard into the mêlée of killer whales. They left him alone for his shipmates to fish out, but after that the boats stayed in the marina, and the economy and tempers went to hell.

Connor and his staff had their hands full then. Both domestic fights and barroom brawls kept everybody hopping, even with reinforcements from the sheriff's people. Connor got Finster sent to the county jail, as he was never sober now and had become a serious menace to public safety.

When the fishermen and the fishermen's families were not in combat, they were trying to figure out what had brought down on their heads the eerily combined wrath of sea creatures that should never have been able to work together. They talked endlessly, and all the ancient tales were brought out and dusted off. After a few sessions the perfectly normal *Octopus dofleini* that had alarmed the *San Tomas* had grown to a Kraken which had clung to the ocean bottom with an unknown number of arms while it tried to pull the boat down with at least ten others.

Connor sat listening to such a conversation late one night. He had just broken up another brawl and was wearily sipping a draft beer at Jacko's bar. Four men were drinking bourbon at a table a few feet away.

"Maybe it's the people of the sea doing it. You know, leading an



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attack on land people and starting here."

"Whata you mean, 'people of the sea'?"

"The seals, the ones who take off their skins to come ashore looking just like people and then put them back on again when they want to be seals and swim. Maybe they're mad about the sealing or something."

"Why would they start here then? No sealing around here, not even in the whole country."

"Yeah, well maybe one of them got done dirt ashore, got mugged or something, and went back and told his relatives; or maybe they don't like people like Bob Boyd shooting otters all the time. Maybe he shoots seals too."

"There any she sea people?"

"Huh?"

"*She* sea people."

"Oh. Must be or they couldn't go on existing. I mean, seals have pups all the time, after all."

"Well, then, maybe it was a sea she person—I mean a she she person—dammit, a sea lady; and she came to town and got knocked up by some guy and wants revenge."

"Or her old man does."

"But are they that much like people? Can a man and a she—a sea lady make it together?"

"I don't know, but I made it with a mermaid once."

Jacko's did not merely fall silent; it froze. The man who had made the remark, a wiry Nisei named Hiroshi Endo, froze along with everyone else and obviously wished he had done so a moment earlier.

"You screwed a mermaid? A real one?"

"Nah, I was just kidding. Everyone knows mermaids aren't real."

Somehow this hopefully tendered demurrer did not have the desired effect. The very walls seemed to lean in on the speaker, who was fighting for nonchalance.

But before the silence could deepen into active menace, a hoarse voice fell into it from the other side of the room.

"Did she have red hair?"

Endo caught himself as his chair began to topple over. "Yeah," he replied, "long and red. And her skin was kind of pale green."

A different voice, this time from down the bar: "And was she little, not much bigger than a kid? Except in the right places, if you know what I mean."



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"Yeah."

From a table just beyond Endo's: "And pretty, real pretty?"

"Yeah, real pretty all right. Say, what the hell is this anyway? All you guys screwed her too?"

A chorus of assent took in half the men present, and the ensuing gabble of amazement took in all, plus the women. Details of anatomy and behavior were indecorously compared, and it came to appear that either all mermaids near Otter Bay looked and made love alike, or one mermaid had been a busy girl.

Connor sighed wistfully at the ill luck that had permitted him to meet her only after her generosity had been brought to a halt.

Every man had thought his experience unique and either gloated over it or wondered at it, according to his nature, in secret. At first it was simply too extraordinary to be believed, and later it had occurred to most that their dalliance, however amiable at the time, might have had something to do with the attacks on the town's fishing. No one had dared invite the consequences of revelation, until Endo got a little too drunk and slipped; and then they were all too startled and excited to hold back. Which was lucky for Endo.

Connor noted with interest that no one present had seen the mermaid for a week. After a while, when the conversation had broken into small groups and become repetitive, he went home to bed.

Next morning, as soon as Sergeant Grant had finished his report and taken his gritty eyes away to shut them for a while, Connor settled down with a cup of Millie's corrosive coffee, Dr. Huntleigh's autopsy report, and a tide chart.

In maritime communities tide charts take the place of calendars. If you ask someone about a past or future date, out comes the tide chart, usually a neat little booklet suitable for sliding into a hip pocket, and all is made clear by the ready recollection of what happened or is planned when the tide is –1.7 at 6:38 A.M. It is a constant, unfailing mnemonic to people whose schedules follow those of the sea.

On June 16th low tide had been –0.3 at 4:12 A.M. Not much of a low tide, and the high had been fairly good, which was one reason for the sea lady's having been so little battered. Few rocks were exposed or even near the surface in the ring around the inlet where she was found. Unless she had actually been killed on the spot, she must have slid easily over the ring rocks and been lowered with comparative gentleness into the shallow pool where



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Hazerbedian found her.

Unless, of course, he had put her there in the first place. Probably not, but the possibility had to be kept in mind for a while yet.

So she was either killed at low tide and placed where she was found or killed nearby at high tide. There were just enough abrasions on the skin to suggest the latter, that she had been swept at some point over the ring rocks and into her hard last bed, however lightly. And it had to be close to the turn of the tide, because it is only then, when wave action is highest, that creatures small and large are too busy protecting themselves to gnash on a convenient feast. Wave action would also account, as both Connor and Huntleigh had noted, for the absence of significant lividity. The tide had begun receding at about 12:30 A.M., having been high at 9:00 P.M. the previous night.

So maybe sometime between midnight and 2:00 A.M., give or take a half hour either way.

"Millie, get me the report for the night of the 15th, will you?"

"Sure thing, Chief."

He looked at the autopsy report again. Probably a .22 bullet. Rifle, most likely, although it had not been recovered and no one would ever be sure. A lot of people had .22 rifles. Kids got them for Christmas. Practically all the boats carried them, ostensibly for sharks but too often for otters.

"Here you are, Chief." Millie laid the report book, opened to the requested night, on his desk.

"Thanks. Have you got any more coffee in the pot?"

Millie went off for a refill, and Connor skimmed through the report. Fight at Jacko's, bad one. Boyd was still in the Salinas jail, and one of the *St. Brendan* men was still in the hospital. The other one, the barmaid, and Jacko were all back on the job but wickedly scarred.

That fight had started unexpectedly when a bunch of the bar's patrons had been telling sea stories. There had been a lot of that sort of thing lately. Could someone have mentioned a mermaid?

Where had Boyd been before the fight? It didn't start until nearly closing time, about 1:30. Connor picked up the phone.

"Thanks. Jacko. Figured you'd remember that night."

Boyd had arrived at Jacko's at about 1:00 A.M. And someone had said just last night that Boyd was always shooting otters.

Fat lot of good all this was going to do. No witnesses, no bullet, no footprints, no damn way to connect Boyd or anyone else with a



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cheerfully affectionate, exquisite lady of the sea who was lying bloody in a cold drawer in Salinas.

Connor went on stewing and searching for two more days, and he became increasingly persuaded of Boyd's guilt. But evidence simply did not appear. A scuba diver had the predictable lack of success in searching for the bullet, and the low tides that week were too insignificant to expose the area to a dry search.

Boyd had been out in his small boat—night fishing? For what? Or whom?—on the night of the 15th. The harbormaster had seen him leave the marina shortly after nightfall and return a little before 1:00 A.M.

An insomniac living near the discovery inlet had probably heard shots, but with the booming of the ebb surf it was hard to be sure. No witnesses, no bullet, no footprints.

Opportunity? Sure. Means? No sweat. Motive? Boyd was a mean son of a bitch, but that could not technically be considered motive for murder. Of course, this whole mess could not technically be considered murder.

In the end it was settled the way these things usually are settled. A witness walked into Connor's office and handed him his case.

Old Beppo did not, after all, confine his appreciation of girls to watching them. He, too, had enjoyed the favors of the town mermaid; and, unlike most others, he had enjoyed them on several occasions. The last of these occasions took place on the night of June 15th.

"I didn't like to talk about it, Chief Connor. It was something I wanted to keep to myself, even after everyone else was talking about it. I didn't mind about that. She was not like us, and it was right for her to behave like the dolphins, her cousins."

"She was too much a wonder to talk about?"

" 'Miracle' would be closer. I can't begin to tell you how charming, how sweet she was. If you had seen her, you'd at least know how beautiful."

"I did see her. She was still beautiful, but she was dead. Did you come to tell me about that?"

"Yes," said the old man heavily. He sat for a moment, remembering, trying to stop his recall before it came to the moment he knew he must dwell upon. "We were lying in a sandy hollow in the big rock on the north side of the cove, out by the dropoff, talking after we had made love. That's funny, you know. I never did learn how she could talk our language. Both Italian and English.



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Maybe from sailors.

"It was a soft night, and the tide was just turning. The moon was almost full. I told you I didn't mind about her loving other men. But Bob Boyd minded. His boat came around from the south, too quiet for us to hear. She was laughing—you ought to have heard her laugh, so soft and gay. All of a sudden, his light was full on us. She could move like an eel, and she slipped into the water before I could think. She was nearly out of the cove by the time he had his rifle out, but he still got off a couple of shots at her through the water.

"She must have had some idea of pleading with him, because she surfaced and turned to face him. That's when he hit her. She sank without making a sound. He tried to get me too, but I hid behind the rock, and he gave up after a while. Then I came out and watched the tide fall, hoping I could find her somehow."

"Did you?"

"No. I figure she must have been swept out by the tide. I guess that's the best thing for a—wait a minute. You said you'd seen her."

"That's right. She either wasn't carried out, or she got brought back in by a wave over the ring rocks. She was in a tidepool. She wasn't beat up or chewed, if that helps. How did you leave?"

"Back along the rocks and north to the road."

"It figures."

"Where is she now?"

"In Salinas. You wouldn't want to see her. They did an autopsy."

"What will you do with her?"

"I don't know. I suppose the scientists will want to keep her, but I haven't any idea what the law is on it. It isn't even a crime to kill her."

"Perhaps not by our law, Chief Connor. But perhaps the sea people, her people, have laws of their own. If I were you, I would try to find a way to give her back to them. They might then stop searching for her, as I suspect they are doing."

"Did you give her the rose?"

"Yes."

Later, driving through the town, Connor wondered what he could do about the body. Neither Hazerbedian nor Huntleigh was going to like the idea of giving away a chance at scientific immortality, not even to mention extended study of mermaid anatomy. But if he could not find a way to send the lady back to her for-



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midable friends and relations, the town would soon be paralyzed, and a lot of people would suffer. Fishing was not the only source of income in Otter Bay, but it was the principal one, and most of the others revolved around it in one orbit or another.

Without noticing, he had driven in the direction of the marine station, and now he folded the Plymouth around a sharp bend and through the gates.

He found Dave Hazerbedian in the main lab, putting a nerve-damaged octopus through its paces in a kind of aquatic maze.

"Look at this, Jack!" he called happily. "He's been doing this for two weeks now without his normal sensory guides, getting it right every time. If that's not memory, I'd like to know what is! Ha!" Plans for a paper that would crush diehard opposition to his current theory were clearly to be read in his expressive face.

"Glad to hear it, Dave. Give 'em hell, when you get around to writing it. Look, I wonder if you'd mind dropping by Jacko's tonight, say about ten o'clock. I'd like to talk to you."

"Well, yeah, I guess I can manage that. But don't you want to tell me what it's about? The mermaid?"

"The mermaid. But I don't really want to go into it now. See you tonight?"

"Sure. So long." And Hazerbedian turned back to his octopus, who was reaching a sinuous arm hopefully out of the tank in search of the shrimp he had earned.

Connor ate lunch at the pancake house on Cliffway, as he did at least three times a week, and made the usual mild jokes to Jill, the waitress there, about her sluggish fiancé, whose reluctance to move toward either seduction or the altar was a matter for extensive local comment.

Back in the office, he called Patty Huntleigh and persuaded her to join him and Hazerbedian at Jacko's. It was not the sort of bar she usually patronized; and she always hated unscheduled social activity; but her curiosity overcame her resistance, as he had known it would.

Saturday night at Jacko's should have been a loud, guffaw-punctuated, fish-smelling brawl, the weekly blowout of men and women who worked hard and lived with danger. That's what it should have been.

What it was was a continuation of the glum, frustrated, cantankerous drinking that had been going on all week. Jacko kept his father's venerable bung starter close to hand these days for the inevitable, bitter fights. Conversation ran on in a resentful



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mutter throughout the room.

At a matchbook-steadied square table in the back corner Connor left his friends to work out the problem for themselves, until they became impatient.

"All right, Jack. We see something's wrong. Are you going to tell us about it, or do we have to guess?"

"I think I can guess, Dr. Huntleigh. It's the killer whales' and other things' attacks on the boats, isn't it?"

Connor nodded.

"What attacks? What killer whales? And what do killer whales and fishing boats have to do with us and the . . . oh. Light begins to dawn. It's time for an explanation."

This time Dr. Hazerbedian nodded.

"You're right," said Connor. "Here it is. As nearly as anyone can tell, our little friend has relatives; and they have friends; and they're all mighty unhappy about losing their girl. No boat dares show its prow beyond the breakwater, and that means nobody fishes. And that means no fishing people make any money. Eventually nobody eats, not just the fishermen and their families but the merchants who sell to them; the doctors who treat them; the bartenders, hotel maids, and hookers who serve the tourists who come to eat what the fishermen catch; the . . . "

"We've got the idea, Jack. If something isn't changed, the town is done for. So where do we come in? You want us to go out on the breakwater with a bullhorn and tell them she's dead but otherwise fine?"

Hazerbedian frowned at his beer. "You want us to forget about her and send her home, don't you?"

"It does seem the only way. It's tough on you two, though."

"Oh well," said the coroner, after a long painful silence spent looking at the distraught people around her, "I've got too many corpses to look after as it is. Can't spend all my time showing off one. And I sure as hell don't need any extras from the waterfront bars. I'm glad I got a look at her anyway."

"Dave?"

"It would have been fun, but world-shaking scientific discoveries do have a way of leading to acrimony from one's colleagues, and I like a quiet life. What shall we do?"

"I'd like to arrange some sort of funeral boat. I think I know someone who'll know the best way to go about it. Then, I guess, we send her out to sea."

"She's pretty messed up, you know."



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"Can you do some cosmetic repairs?"

"I think so," said Dr. Huntleigh. "Sure. I can make her presentable, and I know a mortician who can give some ideas about makeup without having to be told anything. She ought to pass inspection, if it's not too careful."

In the meantime other plans were being laid. Old Beppo had spent the afternoon discussing some ideas of his own with his daughter and three sons, who, with their spouses, jointly worked their trawler. Aside from their common dismay over the threat from the sea, two of the brothers had been among the little mermaid's following.

After some consideration, they decided it was not just a family matter, so they spread out among the sea-going populace. By the time Connor, Huntleigh, and Hazerbedian left Jacko's, support for the Mencacci plan was widespread, and by the time next morning's final Mass was over, it was unanimous.

All plans have weak spots. The chief had not wholly worked out what he was going to do with the body after he had it tidied up and released. And Beppo had not been able to figure out a surefire way of getting at the body. Connor solved the old man's problem by asking him to make the funeral arrangements; and Beppo solved Connor's by agreeing, although he did not go into detail concerning his ideas about the ceremony. He did mention flowers, and Connor went looking for white roses.

Dr. Huntleigh worked through Sunday, and by late evening she had managed to restore her involuntary client to a surprisingly pleasing appearance. A deft hand with a suture needle and a few dollars' worth of Max Factor's finest helped. She had thought hard about keeping some of the viscera for study but decided to settle for a lot of photographs and a few very discreetly prepared slides. No telling what solemn taboo anything more damaging might violate, and she didn't like to think of the consequences of that.

They moved the body late at night, when the morgue was as quiet as it ever was. The priest of the Church of the Magdalene, who figured a soul was a soul, wet or dry, had agreed to hold a midnight vigil in the church and allow those who would to come and offer prayers. A Mass, he felt, might be going too far and attract undesirable attention from newspapers and bishops.

The turnout was in small groups, discreet but universal.

Monday's outgoing tide was at 11:00 A.M., and all preparations were complete early. The thing had to be done quickly, if the local reporters were to go on believing the rumors were all nonsense



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until after the lady had returned to her family.

The day dawned clear, which is unusual for Otter Bay. Connor sat at breakfast in the pancake house, moodily pouring too much boysenberry syrup on a waffle. On the booth seat by his side was a huge bouquet ruthlessly stripped from the white climber that covered one side of his daughter's porch. Kitty and Don were already down at the pier with the produce of the climber's opposite number.

As the chief looked out the window, trying to enjoy the sweet morning, he saw Bob Boyd enter the post office across the street.

"Jill, give me change for a couple dollars, will you?"

"Sure, Chief, but I don't mind if you tip me with bills."

"Not a chance. There's too much boysenberry syrup on this waffle. Thanks. . . . Lemme speak to the sheriff. . . . Dan? What the hell's your prisoner doing in Otter Bay?"

"Whatever he wants, Jack. Some of his friends made bail, got him out this morning."

"Damn. See you around."

Connor paid his bill, gulped the last of his coffee standing, picked up his flowers, and left. He saw no reason to speak to Boyd and certainly had no desire to; but he did follow him in the black and white, as much to let him know he was being watched as anything else.

Boyd made a bee line for Jacko's, which opened early on the pretense of serving breakfast—packaged doughnuts, boiled eggs, and pickled pigs' feet, washed down with bourbon and beer. About what Boyd deserved.

Connor drove on, intent on cleaning up his routine work in order to free himself and his staff for the funeral. There were still people in town who didn't know about the presumed cause of recent events, even some who were ignorant of the events; but their number did not include Sergeants Grenfell and Grant, nor Officers Smith, Lavine, or Candace, none of whom was about to miss a chance to see a real mermaid, however tattered. As long as the two patrol officers on duty stayed near their car, Connor felt the town could manage for an hour. The alternative was mutiny.

A car pulled up to the curb in front of Jacko's. The young woman driving it waited while three men of descending ages got out, went into the bar, and returned almost immediately with a struggling fourth. The car drove away. Jacko and his barmaid emerged a moment later, locked the doors, and headed briskly for the fishing pier.



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A large, silent crowd was gathered on the pier, nearly all fishing folk—men, women, and children. Father Haggerty stood next to a makeshift catafalque so heaped with white flowers as nearly to hide its still burden. It all resembled a festival of some sort, but it was not one.

A fog bank loomed offshore, ready to topple onto the bay.

Everyone knelt, and prayers were swiftly said. Strong hands plucked the mermaid from the bier and lowered her carefully into a waiting dinghy, arranged her to lie straight with her hands crossed over her breast and her faded tail carefully fanned out over the sternsheets. This was the chance for those who had not seen her before to look, and everyone did, but it was not yet time for curious or admiring comment, only a massed sigh. The flowers, including Connor's and Hazerbedian's, covered her again, and it was time for her to set out.

A young man pounded down the pier, waving his arms and shouting breathlessly.

"Chief Connor! Chief Connor! Hurry! Accident! Three cars! People hurt! Cliffway and Overlook! You gotta come quick!"

Great. Only the biggest and most convoluted intersection in town. Tie everything up for hours. And casualties too. "Oh hell and damnation." Connor turned to the car where Smitty and Candace were sitting dutifully, or trying to while hanging out the windows to get a look at the boat. "You'd better hustle over there. Call me, if you need me. I'll turn my radio up."

His back was to the crowd, and the members of his staff were concentrating on what he had to say. None of them noticed a car parked by the wholesaler's shed. None of them saw its door open and five people get out, one with extreme reluctance.

Connor heard a motor start. They must be casting off, sending the funeral boat out, but he couldn't see it. The crowd had closed up between him and the end of the pier. He couldn't see the excitable young man who had brought the message either. He must have melted into the crowd.

Connor wanted to get a look at the boat as it left, and suddenly he found an opening. Pushing to the fore, he saw it, nearly through the breakwater, well on its way. The outboard towing it should turn off pretty soon, if it was not to run into trouble from those who waited out there.

It didn't turn off, although it paused briefly while someone lashed down the tiller, jumped out onto the breakwater, and began to run back. Connor couldn't be sure, but he thought he



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saw a second person. Only why would anyone lie down in a boat under these circumstances? Or even stay in it, for that matter?

Mickey Candace worked her way to his side. "Chief, there isn't any accident. They told us after you left."

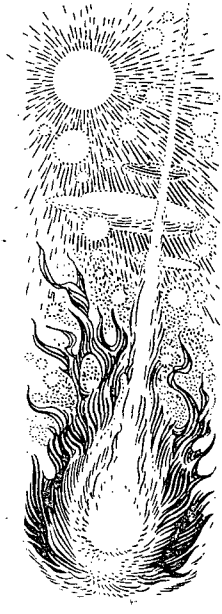
"I know. Now."

No one spoke. The linked boats headed straight out toward the mouth of the bay. Why would anyone lie down in a boat under these circumstances?

"Is he alive, Beppo?"

"Yes. Tied up. We wanted him to know."

A bell buoy tolled, and the fog rolled in and down.





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# THE PINCH-HITTERS

## by George Alec Effinger

**art: Vincent Di Fate**

*The author has a short story collection just out from Doubleday,* Dirty Tricks, *and a novel from the same publisher,* Teflon. *He's recently completed a non-fiction book on pinball,* Blood Pinball, *and a suspense novel,* Steal. *He reports that he has a number of short stories, unfinished and waiting the completion of the novel he's currently working on.*

The telephone rang, and the noise woke me up. I reached across the bed to pick up the receiver. I was still half-asleep, and something about the dimly lit hotel room disturbed me. I couldn't identify the trouble, though. "Hello?" I said into the phone.

"Hello? Is this Sandor Courane?" said an unfamiliar voice.

I didn't say anything for a second or two. I was looking across the room at the other twin bed. There was someone sleeping in it.

"Is this Sandor Courane?" asked the voice.

"It often is," I said.

"Well, if it is now, this is Norris."

I was silent again. Someone was claiming to be a very good friend of mine, using a voice that didn't belong to Norris. "Uh huh," was all that I said. I remembered that I hadn't been alone the night before. I was at a rather large science fiction convention, and I had met a rather nice young woman. The person in the other bed, still asleep, was a large man I had never seen before.

"Where are you?" asked the person who claimed to be Norris.

"In my room," I said. "What time is it? Who is this?"

"This is Norris Page! Have you looked outside?"

"Norris," I said, "I can't think of a single reason why I would waste the effort to walk across the room. And I don't know how to say this, but, uh, you don't sound at all like Norris, if you know what I mean. My clock says it's eight-thirty, and that's a rotten time to wake somebody up at a convention. So I think I'll just hang—"

"Wait a minute!" The voice was suddenly very urgent. Much



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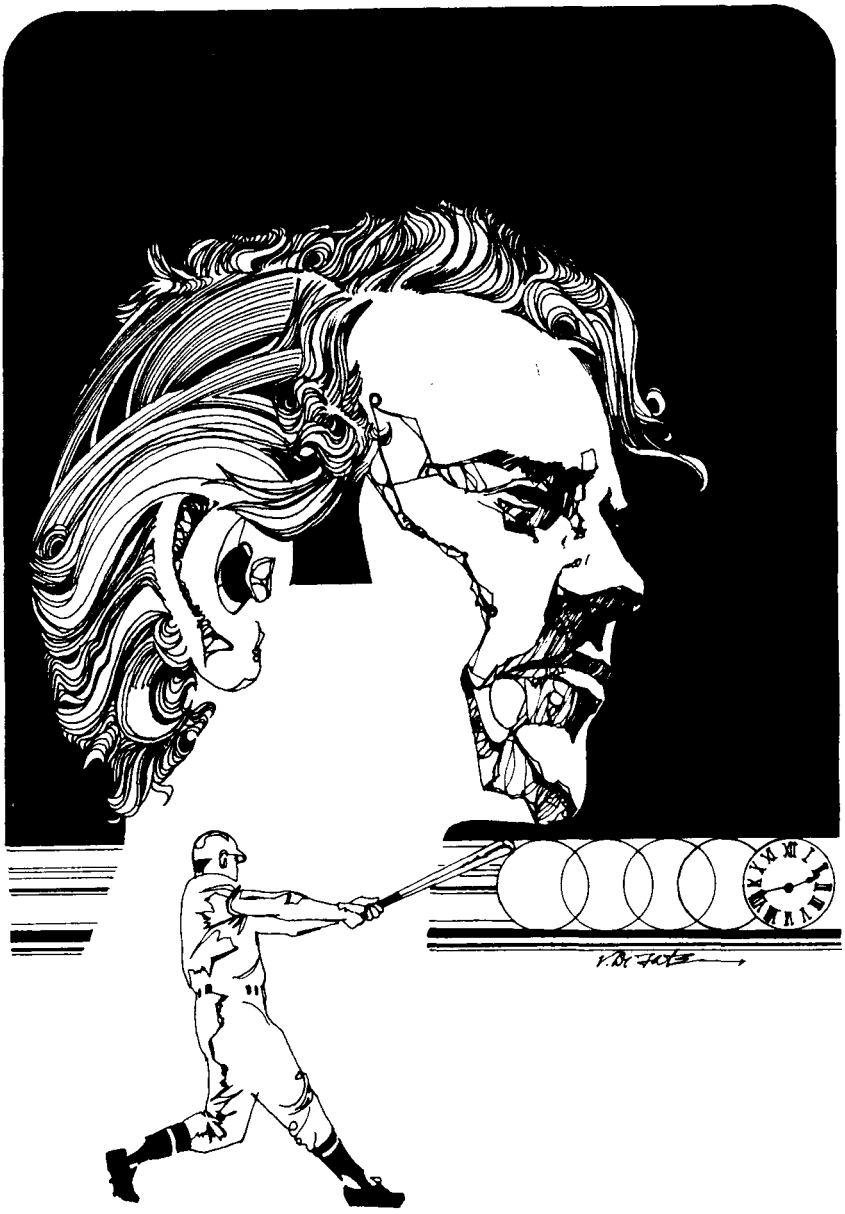



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more urgent than a voice generally gets at a science fiction convention. I waited. The voice went on. "Look out the window," it said.

"Okay," I said: I'm moderately obliging. I got up. I was wearing thin green pajamas, something I have never owned in my entire life. I didn't like that discovery at all. I walked quietly by the stranger on the other bed and peered through the slats of the venetian blinds. I stared for a moment or two, then went back to the telephone. "Hello?" I said.

"What did you see?" asked the voice.

"A bunch of buildings I've never seen before."

"It's not Washington, is it?"

"No," I said. "Who is this?"

"Norris. It's Norris. I'm in New York."

"Last night you were in Washington," I said. "I mean, Norris was here in Washington. Why don't you sound like Norris?"

There was a short, exasperated sound from the voice. "You know, you don't sound like you, either. You're in Boston."

"Boston?"

"Yeah. And Jim is in Detroit. And Larry is in Chicago. And Dick is in Cleveland."

"I feel sorry for Dick," I said. I was born in Cleveland.

"I feel sorry for all of us," said Norris. "We're not us anymore. Look at yourself."

I did. Beneath the pajamas, my body had become large and hairy. My tattoo—I have an Athenian owl tattooed on my left forearm—was gone, and in its place was a skull with a dagger through its eye and a naked lady with an anchor and a snake. There were certain other pertinent revisions in the body. "Wow," I said.

"I've been up since six o'clock running this down," said Norris. "The five of us have been hijacked or something."

"Who did it?" I was feeling very unhappy about the situation.

"I don't know," said Norris.

"Why?" I was starting to feel very frightened about the situation.

"I don't know."

"How?"

"I don't know."

I was beginning to feel annoyed. "Since six o'clock, huh?" I said. "What *have* you found out?"

Norris sounded hurt. "I found you, didn't I? And Jim and Larry



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and Dick."

I got the same cold feeling at the base of my spine that I get when I have to have blood taken. "We're scattered all over the United States of America. Last night we were all in the same lousy hotel. What happened?"

"Take it easy." When Norris said that, I knew we were all in trouble. "It seems as though we've been, uh, transported back in time, too."

I screamed, "What?"

"It's 1954 out there," said Norris.

I gave up. I wasn't going to say another word. When I started the day, I was sleeping very nicely. Every time I opened my mouth, it only encouraged Norris to tell me something else I didn't want to hear. I decided to clam up.

"Did you hear me?" he asked.

I didn't say anything.

"It's 1954 out there. You've been transported back and put in the body of, uh, wait a minute, I wrote it down, uh, Ellard MacIver. Do you know who that is?"

I felt cold again. "Yes," I said, "he was a utility infielder for the Red Sox. In the fifties."

"Right. You have a game today against the Athletics. Lots of luck."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Norris laughed, I don't know why. "Play ball," he said.

"How do we get back?" I shouted. The man in the other bed grumbled and woke up.

"I haven't figured that out yet," said Norris. "I have to go. This is long distance. Anyway, this week you play the Tigers, and you can talk it over with Jim. He's in the body of, uh, this guy Charlie Quinn. Second base."

"Wonderful," I said. "Terrific."

"Don't worry," said Norris. "I have to go. I'll talk with you later." He hung up.

I looked at the phone. "Terrific," I muttered.

The other guy propped himself up in the other bed and said, "Shut up, Mac, will you?" I just stared at him.

I realized that I should have asked Norris whose body he was in. I shrugged. Maybe Jim would know.

A few days later we had the situation completely sorted out. It still didn't bring us any closer to solving the problem, but at least it was sorted out. This is the way it looked:



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| FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION WRITER | IN THE BODY OF | TEAM | POSITION AND BATTING AVERAGE | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sandor Courane (me) | Ellard MacIver | Boston Red Sox | Inf. | .221 |
| Norris Page | Don Di Mauro | Chicago White Sox | Left Field | .288 |
| Larry Shrader | Gerhardt "Dutch" Ruhl | New York Yankees | 1B | .334 |
| Dick Shrader | Marv Croxton | Cleveland Indians | Center Field | .291 |
| Jim Benedetti | Charlie Quinn | Detroit Tigers | 2B | .254 |

I didn't like it at all. Not batting .221 and being thirty-six years old (I'm not thirty-six, but MacIver was, and he was in danger of losing his job next spring, and if we didn't get home soon, I'd have to become a broadcaster or something).

That morning I went to the ballpark with my roommate. His name was Tony Lloyd, and he was a huge first-baseman. Everyone on the team called him "Money." His most memorable attribute was explaining how Jackie Robinson wouldn't survive the walk from the clubhouse to the dugout if the National League had any men with guts over there. I didn't listen to him much. Anyway, we had a game scheduled for two o'clock, but the Red Sox were headed for a mediocre finish to the season and that meant that everybody was taking all kinds of extra practice and hustling around and pretending that they cared a hill of beans about the outcome of every game.

I, for one, was excited. I was scared out of my skin, too, but I was excited. I followed Lloyd into Fenway Park—the gate guard gave me a nod, recognizing my borrowed body—and stood for a while in the dressing room, just staring at things. I'd always wanted to be a ballplayer when I was a kid, of course, and now. . . .

And now I *was* a ballplayer. Sort of. A sort of ballplayer, a bench-warming antique of a ballplayer that was hitting just well enough to prove he was still alive. I wondered why, if I were going to be transmiggled through time and space, I couldn't have ended up in the body of, oh, Ted Williams, say, whose locker wasn't far from mine. I stared at him, I stared at everybody else, I stared at the towels, I stared at the soap, I stared at the contents of my locker. *My* locker. My locker as a member of a professional baseball team. There were pictures of beautiful women taped to the inside of the door. There were parts of the uniform that I couldn't even identify. I had to watch a couple of other guys getting dressed to see how they worked. I think the guys noticed me



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watching.

After I got dressed I walked through the long, cool tunnel under the stands and emerged in the dugout. Before me was a vast, green, utterly beautiful world. Fenway Park. And they were going to let me go out there and run around on their grass.

I took my fielder's glove and trotted out toward second base. I know how to trot. I was in a little trouble once I reached where I was going. I said hello to men I didn't recognize. Someone else was hitting ground balls to us and we were lazily scooping them up. Well, anyway, *they* were; I was letting them hit me on the elbow, the knee, and twice on the chin.

"Hey, look at the old man," said some kid, backhanding a hot rocket of a grounder. "You going to be around next year, old man?"

I felt angry. I wanted to show that kid, but there wasn't anything I could show him, with the possible exception of sentence structure.

"He'll be around," said another kid. "They're going to bury him out under center field." Another grounder came my way and it zipped between my feet and out onto the grass. The kids laughed.

Later I took some batting practice. This was 1954, of course, and the batting practice was pitched by a venerable old ballplayer whose name had been a legend when I was a boy. I told him that I wasn't feeling very well, and he took some of the stuff off his pitches. They were nice and easy, right over the plate every time, and I hit some liners around the stadium. I pretended that they would have been base hits in a real game. It felt great. After I finished, Ted Williams stepped in and demolished the bleachers.

And then the fun began. The game started. I vaguely remembered hearing a kind of pep talk from Lou Boudreau, the manager. I guess they played the "Star Spangled Banner," but I don't remember that. And then, before I was even aware of what was happening, I was sitting in a corner of the dugout, watching, and we were in the third inning of the game. Frank Sullivan was pitching for us, and Arnie Portocarrero was pitching for Philadelphia.

Right then, if someone had asked me, I might have declined to go back to the seventies, back to typing up fantasies to pay my rent. Why should I? I could stay in 1954 and get paid to play baseball! Eisenhower was president. The space race wasn't even to the starting gate yet. Ernie Kovacs and Buddy Holly were still alive. I could win a fortune betting on things and waiting for



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Polaroid to split.

But no. I had a responsibility to the science fiction world. After all, science fiction might well do without me (just let it try), but Norris and Jim and Dick and Larry were here too, and I had to help my friends, if I could. But could I? Why were we here, what had zapped us more than twenty years into the past?

And then I had a terrifying thought. What all this meant was that more than twenty years in the future, in New Orleans, some man named Ellard MacIver, a failure of a baseball player with very little to recommend him, was sitting down at my typewriter and continuing my writing career. No! I couldn't bear it! If anyone was going to ruin my career, I wanted it to be me.

On Sunday night we rode the train out to Detroit. It was a rotten trip. I hadn't gotten into any of the three weekend games with Philadelphia, which was just as well. I was extra baggage to the Red Sox, carried along in case a hole opened up and swallowed four-fifths of the team down into the bowels of the earth. I was looking forward to talking with Jim. Sure, 1954 had its good points —I think I counted about six of them—but, all in all, I had decided that we had to get out of the mess somehow, and as soon as possible. I had a contract outstanding with Doubleday, and I didn't want Ellard MacIver writing that novel. If he did and it won a Hugo, well, I'd have to join the Navy or something.

Fortunately, Jim was in the same frame of mind. Jim is a great guy normally, but this situation was driving him crazy. He was supposed to be a second-baseman, a starting second-baseman, and he had fallen on his face three times trying to pivot on double-play balls. Also, his batting had gone into a slump (understandably enough), and he didn't like the body he had been put into. "You think the old one gave me trouble," he said, "this one complains if I eat Wheaties."

We had lunch at my hotel on the afternoon of the first game of the Detroit series, Tuesday. "Have you had any ideas about who's doing this to us?" I asked him.

"Is somebody doing this to us?" he asked.

I looked at him blankly for a moment. It hadn't occurred to me that all of this might be a function of the universe, instead of an evil plot. That made me feel even worse. "Look," I said, "we have to believe that we can get out of this somehow."

Jim ate some more oatmeal. "Fine," he said, "we'll believe that. What next?"

"The next logical step is to assume that if this is being done to



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us, that *someone* is doing it."

Jim looked at me like he suddenly realized that I was just a bit dangerous. "That's not the most spectacular reasoning in the world," he said.

"Well, we have to make that assumption. It doesn't make any difference who it is. The main thing is that we flip things around the right way."

"Boy, do I hate this oatmeal," he said. "Wait. What if we flip things, and we end up somewhere else? I mean, like in the bodies of apple salesmen in the thirties. Don't do anything we'll regret."

"I won't," I said, because as yet I couldn't think of anything at all. "If anyone can figure this out, Larry can."

"Right," said Jim, smiling suddenly. "We'll let Larry figure it out. You and I write sort of surreal fantasies. Larry is the real nuts and bolts science fiction type. He'll know what to do."

"Right," I said. We finished eating and went out to the ballpark. I sat in the corner of the dugout during the game and watched Jim muffling around second base.

The next series was in Cleveland, my hometown. I thought about visiting my parents and seeing myself at seven years old, but the idea was vaguely repellent. I reminded myself that I'd have to see my younger brother at five years old, and that settled the matter. I went to a movie instead.

I talked with Dick several times, and he said that he'd heard from his brother, Larry. Larry is a good old rocketship and ray gun kind of thinker, and we were counting on him to help us out of the predicament. "What do you think?" I asked Dick Shrader.

"Well," said Dick, doing something I'd never seen him do before—take a handful of chewing tobacco, mix it with bubble gum, and stuff it all in one cheek—"unless I have a bad slump the last few weeks, I stand a good chance of finishing over .300. I'm going to ask for thirty thousand next season."

"Dick," I said loudly, "you're not paying attention."

"Okay. Thirty-five thousand."

Clearly there would be no progress at all until the series in New York, when Larry and I could go over the matter in great detail. I guess, then, that I can skip the next several days. Not much happened, really, other than a series with the Orioles during which I got to bat (a weak ground-out), and I had an interview with a newspaperman who thought I was Jimmy Piersall.

Following the first game with the Yankees, Larry and I went to a small restaurant where he wouldn't be recognized. We ordered



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dinner, and while we waited we talked. "How do you feel about this guy Dutch Ruhl taking over your writing career?" I asked.

"Doesn't bother me," said Larry, gulping some beer. Larry breathes beer.

"Why not?" My hopes rose. I thought he had found a solution.

"Well, if we get out of this, there won't be any problem, right?" he said, swallowing some more beer.

"Right," I said.

"And if we don't get out of it, well, I'll just wait around and come up behind him and take my career back."

"That's twenty years from now!" I said.

Larry didn't look disturbed. "Think of all the ideas I'll have by then," he said. "I'll do "Star Trek" in 1960, and *2001* in 1961, and *Star Wars* in 1962, and—"

"What are you going to do with Dutch Ruhl?"

Larry knocked back the last of the beer. "Was there a Dutch Ruhl writing science fiction when we left?"

"No."

"Then there won't be."

"But there was somebody in the body of Larry Shrader, maybe you, maybe not. How are you going to prove *you're* Larry Shrader?"

Larry looked at me as though I were in some way tragic. "All I need are my driver's license and my Master Charge."

"Got those with you?"

Now Larry looked tragic. "No," he said.

"Who could stand to gain from this?" I wondered, as Larry signalled for several more beers.

"Who?" he said, in a hollow voice.

"Who?" I said.

There was a slight pause, and then we looked at each other.

"Who could stand to gain from the sudden disappearance of, well, if I do say so myself, the cream of the newer generation, the hope and future of science fiction?" he said, a little smile on his lips.

"Well," I said, "apart from the Dean of Science Fiction . . ."

"In conjunction with the Most Honored Writer of Science Fiction," said Larry, laughing a little.

"Acting in concert with the Acknowledged Master of Science Fiction," I said.

"With the aid of two or three others we might name," said Larry.



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"Why would they do this to us?" I asked.

"Why, indeed? It's the natural reaction of the old dinosaurs when they spot the first strange mammals bounding through their jungle. But it's a futile action."

"How did they do it?" I was still bewildered.

Larry was not. These things were always marvelously simple to his agile mind. That was why he was hitting .334 for the Yankees and I was chewing gum for the Red Sox. Larry was on his way to becoming a dinosaur in his own right. "They accomplished it easily enough," he said. "They got us here the same way we're going home. By typewriter."

"You mean—" I said, my eyes wide with astonishment.

"Yes," said Larry, "what *is* reality, anyway?"

Before the veal marsala came, we had the solution to our problem. We weren't vengeful, though, because we have to set the tone of the future. That's a heavy burden, but we carry it gladly.

"Now what?" said Larry, drinking some beer for dessert.

"Now we go home. We can go now, or we can wait around here in 1954 for a while, for a kind of vacation."

"We'll take a vote," said Larry, because he's a four-square kind of guy.

Well, we did take a vote, and we decided to go right home, because some of us had library books overdue. Getting home was simple. It was like Dorothy's Ruby Slippers—it was there all the time. We all gathered in Washington, because that's where we had last been together. We all sat together in a large suite in the same hotel where so many years in the future there would be a science fiction convention. We had Cokes and beer and pretzels and potato chips. We had the television on ("The Stu Erwin Show"), and we messed the room up some. "Remember," said Norris, "not one word about baseball. Only science fiction."

"Just science fiction," said Dick Shrader.

We started talking about money, of course. We talked about who was paying what, and that led to a discussion of editors. When we realized how violent our passions were growing we changed the subject to "The Future of Science Fiction," and then "Science Fiction and the Media," and then "Academia and Science Fiction." Just about then a short, heavy man came into the suite with a camera and took Larry's picture. The man sat down and listened. We offered him some pretzels. We talked about "The Short Fiction Market," and two wild young women dressed like characters from a trilogy of novels came in to fill the bathtub



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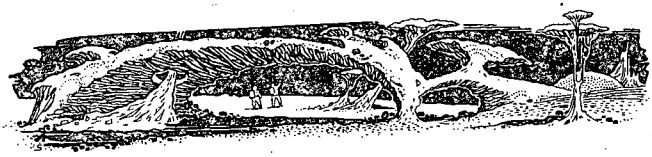
with some viscous fluid. We didn't offer them pretzels. We talked about "Science Fiction as a Revolutionary Weapon," and two writers and an agent and four more fans came in, and it was getting noisy, and Jim called down for some ice, and I went into the hall, and more fans and more pros were coming toward the room, so I went to the elevator and went up to my room. I opened the door carefully. The light was on and I saw that there was someone else in the room. I was ready to turn away, but I saw that it was the same young woman who had been with me at the start of the adventure. I looked down, and of course I was in my old body (it's not *that* old, really, and it's a little worn, but it's mine) and everything was all right for the moment. We were victorious.



## THERE ARE NO WARS WORDS IN THE LANGUAGE
### by Anjala E. A. Ehelebe

Tammy's father took her to see *Star Wars* one evening. During the movie, Tammy alternated between excitement and puzzlement. While leaving the theater, her father asked her if she'd enjoyed the show.

"Most of it, Daddy," she replied, "except for one thing. I couldn't understand a word that big furry guy said."

"Well, Tammy, that was because he spoke another language, and also because that's just the way the wookie mumbles."



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# THE DEAD OF WINTER

## by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

**art: Linda Miller**

*You know Mr. O'Donnell from his previous appearance in these pages; but the illustrator, Linda Miller, is new here. She lives in Los Angeles, works as an animator at the Disney Studios, and feels that her principal current hobby —science fiction fandom—is even stranger than—say—raising racing armadillos.*

Newspaperman, huh? One o' them fancy Eastern papers, I bet. Well, you ain't the only one wants to know how we made it through the winter.

Naw, I don't mind telling you. And I agree, it do seem a mite peculiar that one mangy burro and a couple sacks o' beans could keep the four of us alive. Course, we did come out 'bout skin and bones—got to keep that in mind, boy, when you're writing this story, not that anybody's ever goin' to read it.

I *ain't* insulting you, so you just set on your stool and have yourself another one of them pantywaist drinks. On me, on me. There you go.

It ain't nothing personal, boy, and I ain't casting aspersions on your scribbling, but I figure that editor of yours just ain't going to have nothing to do with this here story. Don't guess the folks back East'd be ready for it, less'n that Twain feller told it like some kinda slow-moving joke. What he did with them frogs was a real shame. Hell, I was there, I know—

All right, all right, I'm gitting to it.

The first thing, I s'pose, is that me, and Ned (who ain't here now), and Jeb (that bald-headed guy sleeping it off in the corner), and Billy (he's upstairs with Miss Caroline, be down right quick) was in the mountains a-looking for gold. Ain't no other reason for a body to be up there, less'n he's got some kinda weird affection for trees and bears.

Round about mid-October we was thinking it was high time to clear out, since we had used up just about our whole grubstake; but then Jeb hit on what looked to be a promising vein. Well, we chawed on that for a while, till Jeb, he says, "Why don't we take



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a couple more days to scratch at this here rock; and if'n it seems like she's maybe kin to the Mother Lode, why, we can get ourselves a bunch of supplies in town and come back for the winter."

I'll tell you, boy, one of a miner's favorite dreams is a-coming out of the hills in the spring with a burro gone bandy-legged from all the gold on his back.

So Ned and Billy and me, we thunk it over some and then said, "Jeb, you got yourself one right good idea there. We'll spend us a couple three days a-working this vein, and if'n she smells good, why, we sure enough will winter up here."

And that's what we started out to do. Now, as ol' Lady Luck would have it, seeing as how she ain't no particular friend of our'n, that vein petered out in two days flat. Veins do that to you. You start in on one that looks like she's a-going to swell into the biggest strike you ever did hear of, but you blink your eyes once and she's gone. Funny stuff, gold.

Now, looky here, stranger, 'tweren't me who was a-pissing his pants to hear this story. I'm plumb sick of it, myself; you're the one what come up here and jostled my elbow till I got to talking. So you just set back, keep your ears open, and let me do this my own way.

That's better.

Where was I? Oh, right. She went and petered out, leaving us with nothing to show fer it but a busted pickaxe. 'Tweren't too disappointing—after a donkey's age o' prospecting you get used to piss-poor luck—but we figured it was high time to head on back. Don't do to stay up thar too long.

Which we sure enough found out the next morning, 'cause when we tried to open the door to our little shack, we was snowed in good and proper. Couldn't get that damn door open to save our lives, not even with all four o' us a-pushing and a-grunting like anything. I *tole* Jeb it shoulda opened inwards.

We knew right then we was a-going to spend the whole damn winter inside that shack, and the only question in our minds was how the hell we was going to do it.

Like I say, we had some beans, and a little bit o' flour for sourdough, but we knew that weren't going to keep us nohow. We was going to have to butcher up our mules, and that was as plain as the nose on your face. No offense intended, son.

Billy, he being the smallest of us, got elected to crawl through a hole we chopped in the roof. Trouble was, when he got outside with his snowshoes, he couldn't find hide nor hair of the mules.



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Whether they lit out when the snow started, or whether they got themselves drifted over, we couldn't tell. All that was left was ol' Miguel, our burro. Poor Miguel. Made a godforsaken stew.

We wasn't too bad off for wood, since we fixed ourselves up with snowshoes and went around lopping off tree branches, but let me tell you, we started to get hungry mighty quick. The flour ran out inside of a week; the beans didn't last but till the start of December, even usin' 'em real slow; and ol' Miguel, well, he was small for a burro, and by New Year's Day we didn't have aught left of him but his hide.

Gospel truth, boy: burro hide don't do much for you outside o' giving your jawbones a chance to git some exercise.

Now, all this time, o' course, we was out on snowshoes hunting for something to eat. We weren't real fussy—venison woulda been our idea o' Heaven, but we'd of settled fer polecat, if we could of found any. I tell you, there weren't *nothing* up there last winter 'cept us.

Well, we must of spent nigh on a week gnawing on Miguel's hide before we got to looking at each other out o' the corners of our eyes. First it was suspicion—guess we each figured one o' the others mighta had himself a secret store of food or something—but the cabin was awful damn small, and there weren't no places in it that could hide anything bigger than a dead cockroach. I know, I made sure.

That suspicion started to blend into something else after a while, and it was such a goddam smooth process that I didn't even know it'd happened till I caught myself staring at Ned's biceps and thinking on how much meat there'd be in 'em.

Brought me up right sharp, I can tell you that. Looking around that dinky little cabin—light weren't too good, on account of there weren't no windows or nothing—but we kept a fire going and I could see by it that everybody was eyeing ev'body else, and just about ready to drool.

Now, you do have to understand here, son, that these men are my friends. I'd of trusted them with my woman, my gold, or my life any day of the week . . . up to then. But from that minute on, well, I'll just have to 'fess up. I kept my back to the wall and my Colt at my waist. Didn't make 'em feel bad, though: they were all acting the same. Lucky there were only four of us—hadn't been fer that, we'd of run out of walls.

Making sure the fire stayed lit was somewhat of a problem—not a one of us wanted to get up and tend it. Finally, I had to take



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matters into my own hands: got the drop on t'other three, and tole 'em to line up against the wall with their hands reaching for the sky. They weren't real happy about that—figured I was picking out the fattest, I guess—but once they saw I wasn't feeding more than the fire, they simmered down some. I didn't let up on the gun, though, till we was all back in our places.

You're looking downright bored, son. I reckon that a newspaperman like you must of heard stories like this a hundred times, and I do apologize for the long introduction. It's the next part that's a mite different.

While I was a-setting there, wondering if it was safe to nod off—there wasn't much else to do but sleep, seeing as how we'd all stopped talking to each other a couple days earlier—there all of a sudden came this bright flash of light. I rubbed my eyes some, and when I opened 'em up again three total and complete strangers was standing smack dab in the middle of the shack.

Well, my jaw dropped 'bout half a mile. So did Ned's, and Bill's. Jeb's would have, too, if 'n he hadn't been sleeping. Jeb don't like to fret himself, never did.

First I checked the roof, to see if they'd fallen through it; but no, it was still there and there weren't no snow on the floor. Then I looked them up and down purty careful, trying to figure out what in tarnation kind of people would just traipse into a snowbound mining camp.

They was mighty strange looking. There were two men, could of bin brothers. Both of 'em was so big they had to scrunch up their shoulders to keep from hitting their heads on the rafters. With 'em was one young lady, right purty, even if she was just about their size. To speak the plain, unvarnished truth, I was impressed. Them rafters was a good seven feet off'n the ground, and I ain't never before nor since seen anybody who needed to keep an eye peeled for them.

Their clothing was what I noticed next, which was natural, considering that they was in some of the fanciest get-ups this side of the Missouri. Naw, 'tweren't formal clothes, like that high-falutin' collar you got on—ain't it hell on your neck?—they was regular clothes, just like we was wearing, but brand-new and fitting like a tailor made 'em, and looking just as comfortable as all get-out. Don't often see clothes like that. Most o' the time, fellers walk around tugging at their crotches, or with their pants legs rolled up, or with the seams all bust, or what have you.

Anyway, after a couple a minutes I got the presence of mind to



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say to them, "Who the Devil are you?" Then I begged the lady's pardon for my salty talk, and she smiled at me real friendly-like.

If'n I hadn't been so hungry, I might of done more than just smile back, she was that good-lookin'.

Well, one o' the two guys, he says, "Damn those slip-shod bureaucrats!" which to me don't sound like much of a reply.

"Yes, Cole," she answers him, "but it's done, and we're here, and we'll have to make the best of it." That lady had one humdinger of a voice—like a bird singing through a pot of honey.

I repeat my question, and the guy that hadn't said anything yet turns and gives me this funny little bow. "Terribly sorry to intrude, sir, but we were under the impression that this area would be uninhabited."

Man talked as funny as he bowed, but I got the gist of it and says, "Well, you'da been right if we'da left a day earlier, but the snows caught us and here we be."

The first guy, the one whose hat was as black as his hair, he stamps his foot and says, "Snow? Do you mean it's *winter*?"

"Yup. Has bin since October the 24th, by my reckoning."

"I don't believe this," he says to the others, sorta like I wasn't there at all. "They told us July."

"Yes, Cole," says the woman, just as sweet as you please, though even an ol' miner like me could see she didn't exactly cotton to him, "but you know their machinery isn't as accurate as they'd like it to be. And they *did* warn us that their error factor was plus or minus six months."

"Does it matter, Cole?" asked the other guy, the one in the white hat.

"But I wanted—"

"Quite, quite," he says, interrupting. "But don't you think that a gun-fight at high noon on a hot July day is just a bit *too* romantic?"

"Gunfight?" I say, sticking my oar back in.

"Yes, sir," he says, like I was some kinda banker. "We have come here to arrange a gunfight."

"Well, da—" I looked at the lady and choked that off. Her cute little eyes twinkled at me. Blue they was, like a mountain sky. "Why didn't you just have it back where you came from?"

"Well, you see—" He looks over to the Cole guy, and asks if he can tell us. Cole shrugs, bumps his head on a rafter, and makes a face. "You see, sir, we haven't traveled through *space* to get here, but through *time*."



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"Huh?"

"We are from your future, sir, from the year 2147."

At that point, I give Ned, Billy, and Jeb the high sign. I was not appreciating the way they were letting me do all the talking with what had to be a crazy man. But they weren't no help. They still hadn't shut their damfool mouths, and when I finally did catch their eyes they just shook their heads in a way that said they didn't want no part of it.

"That's right hard to believe, stranger," I says at last.

"Tough luck, you old goat," says the guy in the black hat, butting in again. "Manny's telling you the absolute truth." He turns to the other two and says, "We've got to hurry; we only paid for an hour."

"Oh, that's right," says the girl.

"Think this room's big enough for the fight?" he asks her.

"If you stand in the corner, and—"

"Wait just a minute," I says, not liking at all what they seemed to be talking about. "You all figuring on holding a gunfight in *here*?"

"Yeah," says Cole, who I have by now picked as the bad guy. "What's it to you?"

"Don't cotton to no gunslinging in my parlor, stranger," I says, easing my Colt out of my holster. "Less'n, o'course, it's me who's doing the slinging."

"Don't get—" he caught sight of my Colt and paled somewhat. "Manny," he says in a hoarse, tight voice, "tell the old— ah, gentleman what's going on."

So Manny, he turned around—moved real nice, that boy did; musta had a touch of the cat in him—and says, "Sir, what we would like to have here is a duel. It seems that the three of us have become embroiled in that situation which the novelists call 'the eternal triangle', and it further seems that the only way to shatter the triangle is to have the two rivals, ah, 'shoot it out'."

"Sounds right phony to me," I grunted, not much liking the whole thing.

"I can certainly understand why," he said real quick. "But it is the truth. And more—I say, do you know what a psychologist is?"

"Huh?"

"Too early for that, Manny," says the lady, giving me a quick wink.

"Then it might be more difficult . . . in our time, sir, which is about three hundred years in your future, we have doctors who



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study the mind, who know all there is to know about it. These doctors can tell us . . . well, it's rather similar to your doctors of the body, who can study a person and say, 'This person can do this or that, he'll be liable to such-and-such a disease, he'll be immune to this other disease,' . . . your doctors *can* do that, can't they?" he asks with a little nervousness.

"Reckon so," I says, " 'r at least that's the story they're spreading. Don't hold with 'em myself."

He ignored that. "In a very similar fashion, our doctors of the mind can tell certain things about a person's personality—for example, that a particular man would rather die than have his love lie with someone else. Out of a hundred men, there might be only one like that, but our doctors can pick him out every time. Or for another example—" He glanced over to that girl and gave her a great big grin. "—some people, not all, but *some*, want their suitors to prove the depth of their love by taking a great risk."

"Hell, pardner," I says, "anybody who's ever dunked a pigtail in an inkwell can tell you 'bout girls what like to be fought over. But what's that got to do with you all being here?"

"Well, sir," he says, "we have that situation here: two who'd rather die than see their love go with someone else, and one who won't love until the risk's been taken."

"Well that's all fine and dandy," I says, "and I can see that you think you're going t'have to shoot it out with ol' Cole there, but what in tarnation did you come here for?"

"The fight could have been held in our own time," he admits, "but somehow the Old West seemed a more appropriate, a more romantic, setting."

"The Old West?"

"Here and now."

"Oh." I chawed on my mustache some while I thunk it over. "Y'come all this way jest to have a romantic setting?"

"That's right, sir," he says.

"Well, shucks," I say, knowing for sure that they're all crazy as hoot owls, but also knowing that I had to humor 'em, "reckon I shouldn't stand in the way of that kind of devotion. Go ahead, have yer fight—but up on the roof. Wouldn't want none of us getting hit by a stray bullet."

Jeb, who come awake a while back, he makes a noise from somewhere underneath his beard, and it jogs me into remembrin the pitiable state of our bellies. "Hold on just a minute there, Manny," I says. "You all happen to bring any food with you? We



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ain't et for more'n a week now, and it's quite a ways to the spring thaw."

"Oh, well—" he runs his pasty white hands through his pockets while Cole and the girl do the same. "I have a candy bar or two, I believe," and he brings them out. "Cole, you have a bottle, don't you?"

The guy with the black hat scowls at him, but brings a flask out of his hip pocket and lays it on the table.

The girl looks real thoughtful for a minute, then says, "Why don't we send them back some food after this is over?"

"Excellent idea," says Manny. "We'll do that—as soon as we return to our time, we'll have them send you some food."

"Fine," I says, "fine. We do appreciate it. Go on up that ladder now, and have yourselves your fight."

They weren't more'n a rung or two up before the four o' us pounced on the bottle and the two little paper packages. Billy like to cut off Ned's fingers because Ned wouldn't let go of his half. I had it a mite easier—I got the bottle and I tole Jeb he wouldn't get none of it less'n he split that bar fair and square.

We were sitting there, licking our fingers and looking for crumbs that might have dropped, when we heard a couple springy footsteps on the roof.

A minute later, two shots rang out, and got themselves swallowed by the wind. Then Manny's head popped through the hole and he says, "I say, it's a bit of a nuisance to carry a dead body back through time—d'you think you could manage to bury the old boy come spring?"

"If 'n you get that food to us, pardner, we'll bury anybody that strikes your fancy."

"Excellent, excellent." A wide grin opened up his tired face. "Shall we bring him down?"

"Hell, no, he'd just stink up the place. Leave 'im on the roof, he'll keep."

"Excellent." He came down the ladder, followed close by the girl. At the bottom of it, he looked at a little gizmo on his wrist. "I say, it's almost time."

"You 'bout ready to leave?"

"Yes, they'll be picking us up any moment."

"Well, nice talking to you. I'll say it again, we do appreciate the food. And t'tell you the truth, I'm right glad *you* won, 'stead of that Cole feller."

"Won?" His eyes opened up real round and surprised. He



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started fading away—guess they was a-pulling him back—but he had time to say, "My dear sir, I didn't win—I was the *prize*."

And the girl, she gave me a real big smile and a wink, and pats the gun on her hip. Right afterwards, they were gone.

That's about it. Reckon their machinery *wasn't* too good, after all, 'cause the food didn't come through for a couple of weeks. But we lasted okay.

Had a Helluva time getting rid of the bones, though.

## COMPUTER SONG

Shadows wind and time oh
shadows wind and time
swirling river moving me
and us and them and they and thee
like jewels through eternity
all filaments of light i see
spun with god and gold and whee
i am i am oh this i be
electron microsparkle sea
shadows wind and time oh
shadows wind and time.

**—Julie Flores**



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# THE QUEST

## by Barry B. Longyear

art: Jack Gaughan

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*Herewith, the most recent tale of the circus-folk of Momus, a series which began with Mr. Longyear's first SF sale, "The Tryouts," from the Nov/Dec '78 issue of this magazine.*

On the planet Momus, south of the town of Tarzak, lies the village of Sina nestled between the Fake Foot river delta and the glittering expanses of the Sea of Baraboo, named in honor of the ship that stranded the original circus on Momus two centuries before. The sun, just peeking over the edge of the sea, bathed the rooftops of Sina in red, while tufts of idle clouds warmed themselves in the glow above the water. Far below them, two figures dressed in hooded robes of purple stood upon a rotting wharf. The taller of the two scratched, then pulled, at a long white beard as he stared out across the Sea of Baraboo. He turned and looked at the scowling face of his corpulent companion. "Please, Durki. Try to understand."

Durki raised one thick black eyebrow and settled the scowl on his face more deeply. "You will kill yourself, you old fool!" His voice, high and nasal, grated on the ear. "You will drop dead from age—if you escape the storms, the exiles, and the monsters. I say it again, Pulsit, you are an old fool!" Durki folded his arms.

Pulsit raised his brows. "Now, Durki, that is no manner in which to address your master. You are a terrible apprentice."

Durki snorted. "I might say a thing or two about your qualities as a master, Pulsit. I am over forty years old, yet I am *still* an apprentice!"

Pulsit winced. "Ah, Durki, please keep your screeching voice to a bearable volume." He shook his head. "How can I turn you loose on an audience with that voice? That's why no other master storyteller would take you on. But I took you on, Durki. You owe me something for that."

Durki turned down the corners of his mouth, raised his eyebrows and nodded. "True." He reached within his robe and extracted a small copper bead. He held it between thumb and forefinger and dropped it into Pulsit's hand. "I trust this squares our accounts?"

"One movill? That's what you figure your debt is after eight years as my apprentice?"

Durki shrugged. "I may have been too generous, at that, but keep the change. It helps ease my mind for allowing you to go off



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and kill yourself."

Pulsit turned his gaze back out over the sea. "Bah! What concern is it of yours, you disrespectful wretch?"

"I have plans on becoming a storyteller, Pulsit, not your partner in suicide. You've never been off the central continent; I doubt you've even been as far as Kuumic—"

"I have too!"

"—and now you want to travel the girth of the entire planet Momus! You know nothing of the dangers! Nothing!"

"Keep your screeching down!" Pulsit looked up the wharf toward the houses along the shore. "Everyone in Sina will be demanding coppers from us for driving them out of bed at this hour. Where is that fisher?"

Durki looked up the wharf, then back out over the ocean. "Perhaps Raster thought better about it. Perhaps he would feel responsible for your suicide."

Pulsit frowned and turned toward his apprentice. "You must stop saying that! I have no intention of killing myself. I am a storyteller, Durki, and I must have experiences to draw upon. All the priests have to do is record history; the newstellers relate events; a storyteller," Pulsit tapped the side of his head, "must have imagination."

Durki shook his head. "You have been a storyteller for many years without having to leave the continent to fuel your imagination."

"My fires—"

"Which were none too hot to begin with."

"My fires . . . are cold. It is only a great adventure such as I have planned that can replenish them." Pulsit looked back up the wharf. "Ah, at last. Here is Raster now."

Durki turned and watched as an enormous hulk, garbed in the yellow and green stripes of the freaks, reeled out from between two buildings and staggered onto the wharf. Under the fellow's left arm were two large jugs, while a third hung from a finger. He grasped a fourth jug with his massive right hand, taking gulps of the contents every few steps. Between gulps, he would wipe dry his black beard with the sleeve of his none-too-clean robe. Durki shook his head and looked at Pulsit. "To whom should I send your belongings?"

The freak pulled up next to the two storytellers and looked down upon them as he belched out a great cloud of sapwine fumes. Durki waved his arms and backed off. Raster smiled, ex-



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posing teeth that might more properly be called "slabs." "I apologize, Pulsit, for making you wait." He sloshed the jug in his right hand. "It took me considerable time to convince Fungarat the merchant to leave his bed and sell me this medicine." Raster raised an eyebrow and leaned toward Durki. "To keep off the sea's chill."

Pulsit held up a hand. "No apology is necessary, Raster. Which boat is yours?" Pulsit waved his hand in the direction of the many sleek sailing vessels belonging to the fishers of Sina. Raster squinted his bleary eyes in the indicated direction, then shook his head. He took a step toward the edge of the wharf, bent over and pointed, jug still in hand. "There." Pulsit and Durki looked down and observed the craft Raster indicated. The single-masted wooden craft wallowed next to the pilings amongst the garbage discarded by the other ships. If it had ever been painted, the paint was gone. Tatters of rigging hung from mast and railings, while coils and tangles of rope littered the few places on the deck not occupied with piles of empty brown jugs. On the boat's stern, lettered in fading yellow paint, was her name: *Queen of Sina.*

Durki took in the sight and nodded. "You spoke the truth, Pulsit. It will not be suicide; it will be murder!"

Raster jumped from the wharf onto the *Queen*'s deck, and the two storytellers held their breaths while the small boat rocked under the force of the freak's landing. Raster kept his feet and walked forward to the tiny cabin to store his medicine. Pulsit stood and placed a hand on Durki's shoulder. "You will not join me in my adventure, then?"

"I am only an apprentice storyteller, Pulsit. It would take the great magician Fyx himself to survive a voyage in that leaking tub."

Pulsit dropped his hand. "Very well. Goodbye, Durki, and I hope you can find another master before too long." The master storyteller went to a ladder and began climbing down to the boat.

Durki leaned over the edge of the wharf. "Another master? Pulsit, where am I to find a master with this voice of mine? Come back, you old fool! The fish will eat you, you know that?"

Pulsit reached the level of the *Queen of Sina* and jumped over the side, stumbled and fell on the deck. He stood and arranged his robe. Raster stumbled out of the cabin and began pulling on a rope. A once-white sail, now decorated in black and grey-green mildew, commenced its halting journey to the top of the mast. Pulsit waved, then turned and went into the cabin. Still holding



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the rope, Raster looked up at Durki and threw a few coppers up on the wharf. "Release the lines, will you?"

"You would make me an accomplice to murder?" Durki snorted, stooped over and picked up the coppers. After he had stuffed them into his purse, he went to the pilings fore and aft, lifted the frayed rope ends and let them splash into the water. As the sail reached the top of the mast, its triangle filled with a gentle breeze and began drawing the boat away from the wharf. Durki looked up at the clear sky, muttered either an oath or a prayer, then scampered down the ladder and jumped onto the deck of the *Queen of Sina*.

Raster secured the mast line and weaved over to where Durki kept a wistful eye on the shrinking houses of Sina. "If you are coming, Durki, it will cost you fifty coppers, the same as your master."

Durki turned and glowered at the freak. "You get my coppers, Raster, when I reach my destination alive!"

Raster shrugged. "Fair enough." The freak went back to secure the tiller.

Durki looked back toward Sina, sickeningly confident that his fifty coppers were as safe as if they were on loan to a cashier from Tarzak.

That night, the village of Sina long gone from view, the *Queen of Sina* pitched and plowed through the dark shrieking outrages of a summer storm at sea. Durki, his face a delicate hue of yellow-green, turned from the tiny glassed-in porthole and watched Raster take a gulp from a jug. The three adventurers sat upon built-in benches surrounding a rough plank table that occupied most of the cabin. A fish-oil lamp swung and sputtered above the table, emitting an evil smell. Raster belched, and Durki's shade changed to green-yellow. Durki pointed aft with a shaking finger. "Raster . . . who is steering this misbegotten thing?"

"Steering?" Raster scratched his head, then shrugged. "I know not, Durki." Raster pointed at Pulsit, Durki and himself, in turn. "One, two, three. We are all here; then no one should be steering."

The apprentice storyteller plunked his elbows on the table and gently lowered his face into his hands. "Tell me, great man of the sea, what is to keep us from swamping or piling up on some rocks?"



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Raster shook his head. "It is a good question, Durki." The freak smiled and held out his hands. "But, I have never been one for intellectual talk—"

"By the crossed eyes of the Jumbo!" Durki lowered his hands. "Raster, why aren't you out there steering?"

Raster grinned and slapped the table top, causing everything upon it, including Durki's elbows, to leap in the air a hand's breadth. "Hah! By my coppers, that's one I can answer! I would get wet."

"Wet? *Wet*!"

Pulsit placed a gentle hand upon Durki's shoulder. "Calm yourself. I believe Raster has secured the tiller. This fine ship can steer itself, you see?"

"See?"

Pulsit nodded and held out his other hand toward Raster. "Our captain says we are days away from any land or rocks—"

"Days?" Durki grabbed his mouth with both hands, swung his feet over his bench plank and rushed through the cabin door, out onto the deck. Raster stood, reached out a long arm, and pulled the cabin door shut. He seated himself, hefted his jug and took a long pull.

Pulsit stretched his arms, clasped his hands behind his head, and leaned back against the cabin wall. "Ah, my captain, I can feel my storyteller's blood stirring already. This will be a fine adventure." He brought his hands down and cocked his head. "Listen!" A long, low moan could be heard. "Listen to it wail. Is it a sea dragon? The ghosts of a stricken ship?"

Raster lowered his jug and pointed an ear in the direction of the sound. "It's Durki. He's got the shipslops."

Pulsit sighed. "Of course, Raster, of course. But the mournfulness of it—doesn't it stoke up your imagination?"

Raster took another pull from his own brand of fuel, lowered the jug, and listened to the apprentice retching, cursing, and wailing at the wind. The freak nodded. "Now that you point it out, Pulsit, it does sound . . . well, the way I always thought of the slave souls sounding."

Pulsit raised his brows. "Slave souls?"

Raster shook his head. "Only a myth of the fishers in these parts. The slave souls were victims the sorcerer-pirate Bloody Buckets enchanted, then strapped to his mainmast to keep watch."

Pulsit rubbed his hands as Durki gave out with another moan.



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"Bloody Buckets! Excellent!" A dreamy look came into the storyteller's eyes. He spread his arms. "The tormented souls of Bloody Bucket's victims howled a warning, that wind and storm driven night, as the . . ." Pulsit lowered his hands and looked at Raster. "What was the ship's name?"

"Ship?"

"Bloody Buckets' ship."

Raster wrinkled up his face in confusion. "I told you, Pulsit; it's only a myth."

"I know, but I am a storyteller. I must let my imagination run free. Here we can take myth, coat it with belief, and make a story—no, *live* a story!" Pulsit reached out and picked up Raster's jug and took a gulp. He replaced the jug, shook his head and held up a finger. "The ship."

Raster warmed to the task and rubbed his hands together. "The *Black Tide* is his ship; the foulest, most evil barge upon the water."

"A great name." Durki issued another moan. "Captain! Captain Buckets! What does the watch say?" Pulsit nodded toward Raster. "You shall be Bloody Buckets."

Raster grinned. "Then, mate, call me 'Bloody'. I lay bare the guts of any swab what calls me 'Buckets'." Raster took another pull from his jug as Durki howled again. The jug dropped to the table as Raster held his hand to his ear. "Avast! Mate, avast there!"

Pulsit finished another gulp at the jug. "Aye, Bloody, what be it?"

Raster waved his hand above his head. "The wretches up there signal us of an approaching prize. Call out the hands!"

"Aye, Bloody." Pulsit pushed open a porthole glass and shouted. "All hands on deck! Bloody has need of your evil hands and steel blades." Above the port, a scream, then a whimper evidenced that Durki had not yet been washed overboard. "The crew is assembled, Bloody."

Raster glared at the wall. "Aye, and a scurvy lot they are too." The freak looked around the cabin, and pulled loose two narrow planks that served as trim between the wall and overhead. He handed one to Pulsit. "Your blade, mate."

Pulsit stood and swung the plank around his head. "It shall be always in your evil service, Bloody."

Raster swung his own plank, tried to stand, but staggered back against the wall. "Avast, ye swabs! On the horizon sails a fat



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merchantman. Helmsman, aim the *Black Tide* down her gullet, and you line monkeys—up top! Stay the mainsheets, matten down the batch covers, and mizzle the fizzenmast! Har! There shall be rapine, loot, and killing for all before the sun sets," Raster stabbed a thumb into his own chest, "or my name ain't Bloody Buckets."

They both dropped down on the benches and refueled on sapwine. After an impressive pull, Raster placed the jug on the table. "What now?"

Pulsit nodded. "The other ship; what shall we call it?"

Raster rubbed his chin. "Should it be a special name?"

"Yes. The *Black Tide* is evil. To fight evil, we must have good. The name of the merchantman must reflect good."

Raster nodded. "The *Honor Bright,* carrying a cargo of . . ." his bleary eyes fell upon his jug, " . . . medicine to ease the sufferings of a stricken city."

Pulsit clapped his hands and missed. "Excellent, and I shall captain the *Honor Bright.* Captain John Fine is my name."

Raster weaved to his feet, shielded his eyes from an imaginary sun with one hand and pointed with another. "Captain Fine! Captain Fine! Abaft the bort peam, there!

"Aye, Mister Trueheart? What is it?"

"Captain, bearing down on us is a pirate ship." Raster fell back against the wall and held his hand to his neck. "The *Black Tide*!"

Pulsit stood next to Raster and placed an arm around his huge shoulders. A hint of a smile played on the storyteller's lips. "Have courage, Mister Trueheart. Our ship is fast, and our crew is the finest to be found in any port."

"But, Captain, it is Bloody Buckets!" Durki issued a drawn out howl. "Listen! Hear his ghost watch!" The sound diminished to a moan, then to a whimper.

Pulsit nodded gravely. "The poor souls. But stiffen your spine, Mister, else we shall fail and a city will die."

Raster pushed himself away from the wall, held his plank before him and nodded. "Aye, Captain. I am all right now."

Pulsit looked at his own plank and turned to Raster. "We must have blood. What do you have?"

Raster turned to a locker next to the cabin door, stooped, and opened it. With both hands he emptied the locker of odd bits of line, empty brown jugs, a half-bolt of sailcloth, paint-caked brushes, and finally a large closed bucket of paint. "Here it is. I must use this to mark my trapbuoys."



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"What color is it?"

Raster opened the wooden top, and stood out of the way. The paint was bright scarlet. "Aye, there is your blood."

Pulsit closed his eyes and held out his hands. "Although the *Honor Bright* was swift, the *Black Tide* quickly closed the distance, driven by Bloody Buckets' sorcery. Grappling hooks flew from the pirate ship, and in moments the two ships were bound together. Bloody's crew swarmed over the side." Pulsit dipped his plank into the paint and jumped up on one of the benches. "Defend yourself, Bloody!"

Raster dipped his plank and mounted the bench on the opposite side of the table. "Har, Captain Fine! I'll have yer soul strapped to my mizzenmast, or me name ain't Bloody Buckets!" The freak lunged at the storyteller, slapping his arm with the plank. "First blood!"

Pulsit diverted the next blow, but Raster's onslaught drove the storyteller to the door of the cabin. As he narrowly avoided a killing blow, Pulsit drove in and poked Raster in the stomach. "Hah, Bloody! Take that!"

Raster picked up the paint and sloshed it down his front. "Curses, Fine! Ye have marked me, that's true. But I am Bloody Buckets, with the strength of ten!"

"Then up with your blade, pirate, and have at it!"

Pulsit swung, knocking the bucket across the cabin, splattering them both, as well as the cabin, with paint. As Raster stepped into a large puddle of paint, he slipped and came crashing down on the deck. Pulsit leaped to the fallen freak's side, lifted his plank, and brought it down next to Raster's neck in a mock beheading. "And, die, Bloody Buckets! Die!"

Pulsit stood and looked in the direction of the overhead. "And Captain Fine, wounded and bleeding, stood atop the deck of the *Honor Bright,* his victory sweet on his tongue, while the flesh of the evil pirate grew cold." Pulsit listened and could hear nothing but the creaks of the ship, the shrieks of the wind, and the snores of Raster. "And, at last, poor souls, you are free!" The storyteller backed up against a wall, slid down, and passed out.

Durki opened the cabin door, stepped inside and saw both his master and the fisher on the deck, soaked in red. More red covered the walls, table, and overhead. "Whoops!" Durki covered his mouth and staggered back on deck. In moments the moans of the slave souls once more stole across the waters.

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The next morning, the waves of the night before calmed to gentle swells, Durki pushed himself up from the railing and placed his hands gently against his aching ribs. He thought upon it for a moment, then concluded that his stomach had finally given in to its fate. He looked around the deck, found a canvas bucket attached to a rope, then picked it up and drew some sea water. He splashed it over his head, rubbed his face and dried it in the gentle wind coming from the northwest. "Perhaps," he said to the fingernail of new sun coming over the horizon, "perhaps this will not be so bad after all." He turned and walked forward of the cabin, coming to a halt at the ship's prow. The *Queen of Sina* dipped into the gentle swells ever so slightly, and Durki was delighted at the lack of response from his bowels. "An adventure will do much to fuel my own storyteller's imagination. I now understand torment."

Durki clasped his hands behind his back, assumed a deep frown, and began pacing back and forth in front of the cabin. "This is a king's man-of-war, Ponsonberry; not a pleasure ship! I *said* fifty lashes, and I *meant* fifty lashes! Now, strip that wretch to the bones, and be quick about it—lest you find yourself touched by the cat!"

Durki stopped, turned and held out his hands. "Captain Cruel, I would rather stand the lashes myself, than subject an innocent man to them."

"You would, eh Ponsonberry! Then order back the master at arms. It would never do to have a common seaman lay bare the back of a king's officer. *I will swing the cat myself!*"

A thumping came from the deck. "Have mercy, Durki, and still your mouth!"

Durki squatted next to one of the cabin ports. "Ah, Raster, you besotted freak. You are up then?"

"Of course I'm up, and with a head the size of the universe!"

Durki snorted. "You must pay the price for your ways, Raster." He heard a scuffle from inside the cabin, then Raster speaking Pulsit's name. "Raster, what is it?"

The freak's face, eyes as red as the paint splashed on his skin, appeared in the port hole. "Come down quick, Durki. I think your master is dying."

Durki and Raster sat on opposite sides of the table, while on the third bench, his face drawn and grey, Pulsit lay prone, covered with sailcloth up to his neck. His grizzled head rocked from side



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to side with the motion of the ship. Durki turned away and closed his eyes. *Amar looked down at the broken body of the great flyer Danto, then up at the trapeze, still swaying against the canvas of the big top. He looked one more time at Danto, then began climbing the ladder, ignoring the pain from his crippled left leg. "The crowd was told they'd see the backwards quadruple tonight, and if it takes my last breath, they will!"*

"Durki, what are you mumbling about?" Raster gulped from his jug and slammed the container on the table.

Durki shrugged. "I was thinking. The deathwatch is an old story."

"Too depressing. I like stories with action, glitter, and pretty girls." Raster belched.

"Aren't you soaking up the sapwine a little early?"

Raster shrugged. "A scale from the dragon that bit me." The freak cocked his head at Pulsit's quiet form. "Your master; do you think he will be all right?"

Durki shook his head. "I don't know. He is an old man." *They gathered like vultures around the old man's deathbed, rubbing their hands, smiling to each other in secret, counting their inheritances before the body grew cold. . . .* Durki reached for the jug, took a gulp and replaced the container on the table. "You are right, Raster. This is too depressing. What would you like to talk about?"

Raster rubbed his chin and raised his eyebrows. "What do you think about the new ambassador to Momus—the one from the Tenth Quadrant?"

Durki shrugged. "I am a storyteller, Raster, not a newsteller. I do not follow politics."

Raster laughed. "Neither am I a newsteller, but I take an interest in whether or not I will become a slave."

"What are you talking about?"

"The ambassador—a Vorilian, Inak by name—is in Tarzak right now. He would get the Great Ring to vote away the defenders from the Ninth Quadrant and accept those from the Tenth."

Durki rubbed his chin. "What do the defenders from the Ninth Quadrant defend us from?"

"Why, from the Tenth Quadrant, of course."

Durki shrugged. "Then if we were defended by the Tenth, we would be safe, wouldn't we?"

Raster frowned, held up a finger, then dropped it. He shook his head. "Our statesman, Allenby, doesn't see it that way. He thinks



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we must keep the Vorilians away from Momus. I agree."

Durki waved his hand impatiently. "Let's talk of other things, Raster. This holds no interest for me."

"No interest?" Raster held out his hands, his eyebrows arched in wonder. "Things are happening that will change the courses of planets—of quadrants, or perhaps the entire galaxy! Your storyteller's blood is thin indeed if it cannot draw inspiration from such events."

"As I said, I am no newsteller." Durki reached for the jug.

"You mean to say that the idea of a great war—perhaps one in space—is of no interest to a storyteller?"

Durki put down the jug, turned his face to the overhead and closed his eyes. *Tadja jetted to one side as the Vorilian glopfiend's bolt sped past. The vapor trail from a passing ship obscured his vision as he tried to sight his weapon on the Vorilian.* . . . Durki looked back at the jug, then shrugged. "Stories like that might interest some, but I don't think you'll find them among the better sorts of people."

Raster frowned, then stabbed himself in his chest with his thumb. "*I* like stories like that!"

Durki nodded. "I rest my case. You see, Raster, most of the listeners we storytellers have at fires along the road, or in the squares of the large towns, don't happen to be wine-soaked, over-muscled, frustrated freaks." Durki raised his eyebrows. "No offense."

Raster grabbed the jug, stood and stomped to the cabin door. "I must go on deck."

The door slammed behind the freak, and Durki turned toward Pulsit as his master began mumbling and moaning. "Pulsit?"

"Durki . . . is that you?" The old man's voice was weak.

"Yes. Are you all right? How do you feel?"

Pulsit reached out a hand and grasped the front of Durki's robe. "Did you see him? Where's the body?"

"Him? See who?"

"Bloody Buckets. We fought all night." Pulsit relaxed his grip and fell back onto the bench. "Ah, it was glorious!"

Durki stared. *Humor him, doctor, otherwise the maniac will kill us all!* "Did, uh, Mister Buckets fight well, Pulsit?"

The old man cackled. "Did he fight well? Look at me, you fool! Anyone who could put Captain John Fine on his back fights well!" Pulsit's eyes rolled up, then the old man relaxed and fell asleep.

Durki shook his head. *You lock me behind these doors, thou*



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*cowering knave in white! But who is to judge the sane? Are you locking me away from the sane? Or are you keeping me safe from all those out there? That is it, isn't it? I am the last sane man in the world–ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. . . .*

For the next few days, Pulsit raved, Raster swilled, and Durki retched their collective way across the Sea of Baraboo until they came in sight of the continent of Midway. Actually, it was the *Queen of Sina* that came in sight of Midway, rather than her passengers, since Raster's state of constant blindness relieved itself only for as long as it took to find more medicine. Pulsit, of course, lay on his bench in the cabin, traveling the bruised reaches of his mind, while Durki hung from the railing, praying for death. The continent of Midway was named in honor of the collection of sideshows that filled the hold of the lone shuttle stranded there in the disaster of the circus ship *Baraboo*. It was isolated from the rest of the planet Momus. Few ships came to its shores, which caused the inhabitants of the coastal village of Mbwebwe to gather on the beach as the *Queen* came into view.

Since the original inhabitants of Midway were comprised of a troupe of Ubangi Savages who also did seconds as Wild Men Of Borneo, and another troupe of acrobatic midgets, it was a curious lot that stood upon the beach examining the *Queen*. After a time, Azongo, the village hetman, came to the obvious conclusion. He looked down at Myte, the meter-tall village priest, and held out his arm toward the approaching ship. "It is obvious, Myte. That unfortunate vessel has been attacked by sea pirates. Look at its tatters of rope and sail, and the rotting bodies draped over railings and deck."

In the cabin, Pulsit sat on his bench, peered through one of the front port holes, and also came to the obvious conclusion. *Cannibals*! His eyes went from the dark savages with their great shaggy heads, to the lighter-skinned midgets that stood beside them. *Giant cannibals*!

Pulsit leaned against the cabin wall and held a hand against his forehead. *What am I doing here? My crew depends upon me–and that city! We haven't delivered the medicine for that city . . . city–why can't I remember its name?* The old man's hand dropped to his lap, he turned his head and looked out of the port hole. The inhabitants of Mbwebwe were moving closer to the water. *The cannibals are attacking, and my crew without a leader*! Pulsit weaved to his feet, pushed his way across the cabin, and



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picked up a paint-smeared plank leaning in the corner. He hefted it and swung it about his head. *As long as I have breath in my body and a blade in my hand, John Fine is not defeated. I'll not have my crew garnished for a savage's gullet*!

Pulsit opened the cabin door, pulled himself up the four steps to the deck, then swooned against the roof of the cabin. "Mister Trueheart! Where be you, man? Call the hands on deck! Stand by to repel boarders!"

Raster pushed from his face the pile of rags and ropes he had covered himself with the night before, opened his eyes, and saw a gaunt visage standing over him shouting and swinging a bloody blade. His eyes opened wide, and he pushed himself back in fear. His mouth worked a silent scream as he saw the tangle of ropes on his legs and feet. "Snakes! Oh, merciful Momus, God of Ridicule, spare me!" Raster bounded off the deck, throwing the ropes aside, then ran to the railing and flung himself over the side.

"Mister Trueheart!" Pulsit staggered to the railing and watched Raster swim toward the shore. "Trueheart, you coward! Come back and stand your ground, man!" The bottom of the Queen grounded, knocking Pulsit off his feet. As he pulled himself up, he looked over the railing to see the inhabitants of Mbwebwe wading toward the ship. He backed up against the cabin, then turned and ran to the other side of the ship. *More cannibals! Waves of them!* He saw Durki hung over the railing and swatted the apprentice across the buttocks with the plank. "Awake, there, crewman! Arm yourself!"

Durki moaned, opened his eyes and saw the golden beach and trees of the village. "Land! Dry, hard, solid land!" He smiled, pulled himself over the railing, and fell into the shallow water with a smack. Pulsit looked down to see Durki wading toward shore.

*What is this? Do I command nothing but cowards? Do the gods test my courage with these things*? First one brown hand, then another and another grasped the railing. Pulsit smacked one with his plank, heard a curse, followed immediately by a splash. "Hah! Defend your heathen selves!" Pulsit ran up and down the railing, smacking hands with the plank and glorying in the curses and sounds of bodies falling into the drink. "If he need must, John Fine shall take on your entire cannibal nation!" For a moment, no new hands appeared on the railing, and Pulsit leaned over the side to see the last of the dark natives wading away from the



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*Queen*. The old man raised a fist toward the shore and shook it. "I am Captain John Fine, commander of the *Honor Bright*! I cannot be defeated! I say this to you: send me *more* cannibals!"

He tossed his head back to laugh, then felt strong arms grasp him from behind. He turned his head to see dark faces and shaggy heads swarming over the deck. *I am captured*! The plank was taken from his hand, and he felt himself being moved to the other side of the ship, lifted over the railing, and lowered into waiting brown arms. *Still, I am John Fine*! "Hear me, you heathen devils!"

"I beg your pardon!" answered one.

"Do not trust your mouths when they water for this body! You shall choke on John Fine!" Pulsit laughed, then became quiet as a great darkness came over him. Those who carried him exchanged puzzled looks, then shrugged and headed toward the beach.

Even though he eyed the food suspiciously and had developed the habit of jumping at the slightest sound, Pulsit appeared well enough by that evening to join his companions at Azongo's table. Coppers were exchanged for the repast, and Durki felt blessed as he enjoyed the packed feeling of the first solid food he had been able to hold down for days. But recalling his own screech of a voice, he listened with envy as Azongo conversed in rich resonant tones. As a pause in the conversation came, Durki nodded toward the hetman. "I would give much to have been born with a voice such as yours, Azongo."

The hetman laughed, exposing a glare of teeth filed to needle points. "So would I, storyteller. But I was not born with this sound; it came only after long practice for my wild-man act."

Durki looked around the table, then turned back to Azongo. "Since we are finished eating, I would lay a few coppers in your palm to see your act."

Raster waved his hand and shook his head. "I've seen several wild-man acts, and they are good sleeping aids, but nothing for an evening's entertainment. They couldn't scare a child."

Azongo raised his eyebrows. "And, freak, would you care to wager your coppers on that?"

"No, but I'll stake a jug of sapwine against a jug of this cobit brew of yours." Raster held up his cup.

Azongo rubbed his chin, then nodded. "Done." He reached forward and extinguished the oil lamp in the center of the table, leaving only a single lamp on the wall to illuminate the room. He



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stood, turned his back on his dinner guests, and removed his robe. "*Hhuurrraaaaggh*!" Azongo leaped about in a crouch, his body scarred and tattooed in bright, fantastic patterns, his face contorted so that his eyes and filed teeth seemed larger than life. In the flickering half-light of the lamp, there was little doubt that the creature before them was a primitive, unreasoning machine of blood lust, coiled and ready to strike. Azongo leaped over the low table and landed next to Raster with his hands held forward, claws extended. "*Aaarrrgggh*!"

Raster backed up against the adobe wall of the room. "Very well, Azongo! Enough!"

The hetman relit the table lamp, collected his coppers and sapwine, then returned to his place. Pulsit watched all of this, but kept his silence. *The natives are restless. When the time is ripe, I must try to convince them that I am a god.*

Raster shook his head. "Even the wild-man act of the Tarzak freaks does not compare to your performance, Azongo. If you came back with us to the Central Continent, you could gather coppers by the sackful."

"Indeed."

Raster nodded. "But the act is only better, not very different." He rubbed his chin. "What you need is a victim. Play out a drama of life-and-death." Raster nodded again. "Yes, that would put the act in the Great Square in Tarzak."

Azongo sipped at his cup, mulling over Raster's words. "It would do me good to make my living with an act again." He held out his hands. "Since we are mostly all wild men, there is little demand for such an act here. And there are others better than I. Being hetman of this village is the only way I can keep a roof over my head." Azongo lowered his hands and shrugged. "But where would I find such a victim?"

Raster stuck his thumb in his chest. "Me." He leaned forward. "I am a strongman with the Sina freaks, but there are many who are stronger, and with better acts. My pitiful performance as a fisher is all that allows me to keep myself in sapwine. But together we shall become rich!" Raster turned toward Durki. "Durki, do you think your master would devise a story for Azongo and me to act out?"

Durki turned his head and looked at Pulsit. The old storyteller stared with unseeing eyes at the lamp on the table. Durki looked back at Raster and shrugged. "Pulsit is still in the grip of his imagination. If he were well, he could devise a fine story."



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Azongo scratched his head, then pointed a finger at Durki. "There is talk of a doctor two day's ride from here."

"Will he treat my master?"

Azongo nodded. "It is said that the doctor treats those who come to him in exchange for plants and animals. It is also said that he has seven fingers on each hand."

Raster shrugged. "That is nothing. Vorub of the Tarzak freaks has sixteen fingers, yet he cannot make a living at it."

"You do not understand, Raster." Azongo lowered his voice. "The talk is that the doctor does not come from the planet Momus."

"Is he a Vorilian?"

Azongo shrugged. "It is all talk. Still, he may be able to help your master. If Pulsit becomes well and writes Raster and me a story, we can put together a great act."

Durki nodded. "Perhaps the doctor can do something for my voice as well."

Azongo laughed. "That I can do. You must exercise your voice by forcing the air out of your body sharply, and growling with your throat, like this." Azongo took a deep breath, then forced it out. "Hhhoooowaughhhh!" The hetman nodded. "It will thicken up your voice if you practice it every chance you get. Try it."

Durki took a deep breath. "Hoowah."

Pulsit's eyes came to life, darting between Durki and Azongo. *What is this? What heathen ritual?*

Azongo shook his head. "You must force the air out faster. Hhhoooowaughhhh!"

"Hhoowahh!"

"Hhhoooowaughhhh!"

"Hhooowaugh!"

"Much better." He nodded toward Raster. "If you are to be my victim, you will need a good scream. Try this." Azongo took another breath. "Aaaaaah!"

Raster nodded. "Aye, it chills the bones." He took a deep breath. "Aaaaaaah!"

As the three screamed and growled, a tear trickled down Pulsit's cheek. *The peasants of the field–listen to them suffer the tortures of the damned! Look, beyond! A dragon! What horror!*

"Hhhoooowaughhhh!"

"Aaaaaaaah!"

Pulsit weaved to his feet and placed a hand on Raster's shoulder. His other hand held an imaginary lance in Azongo's direc-



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tion. "Fear not, sweet maiden, for I, the Golden Knight, shall slay yon dragon and lay its carcass at your feet!"

Azongo leaned forward and spoke to Durki. "Is your master well enough to tell us a story?"

Durki sighed. "This is no story to Pulsit's troubled mind, but reality. He sees the dragon," he nodded toward Raster, "and the maiden."

Azongo shook his head. "With the morning's light, then, we shall set off to find this strange doctor."

Two days' ride from Mbwebwe, deep in the Donniker Basin, stood a compound surrounded by tall, vine-hung saptrees. Surrounding the compound were tall metal fences, the enclosed area being divided again and again into smaller areas containing representatives of Momus's peculiar lifeforms. In its center stood a blue metal building from which curious apparatus bristled, giving the structure the appearance of a bowl-cut porcupine. Inside, Doctor Shart clasped his seven-fingered hands together and groveled before an image on his laboratory's telescreen.

"All I need is a little more time, Ambassador Inak. If I can have just a little more time—"

"Enough!" The image scowled, then pointed a couple of fingers at Shart. "I don't know what halfwit approved the funding for your project, Shart, but when the Council of Warlords receives my report, someone is in for a roasting!"

Shart wrung his hands together. "Inak, the experiments are very complicated, and I am the only one at the station. If you could see your way clear to approving my request for an assistant—"

The image raised its thin yellow brows. "You astound me! You expect the Tenth Quadrant to expend *more* monies in support of your demented theories? Fantasy. Utter and complete fantasy!"

"Inak, just think of the benefits to the government if I am successful. Think of being able to control the entire animal population of a planet. Think of it; being able to spread diseases at will using specially adapted carriers—"

"Think of it?" Inak's brows dropped into a frown. "That's all we can do, Shart, is think about it. We certainly haven't seen any results."

Shart smiled and held his hands out at his sides. "If the Ambassador will remember, the Warlords looked favorably upon my project. It would place a great weapon in their hands, and—"



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"Only if you begin getting results, Shart. No more of this—when will you have something positive that I can report?"

Shart shrugged. "Perhaps . . . thirty days. My experiment on the virus is almost completed. After that, it's just a matter of tuning and adjusting the control banks."

Ambassador Inak rubbed his pointed chin, then nodded toward Shart. "Perhaps then we will be able to send a very glowing report to the Warlords. Yes, that will be just about right."

"If I might inquire, Inak, right for what?"

"The commission from the United Quadrants will be here soon, and then there will be a long period of investigation and negotiation. Allenby, the puppet of the Ninth Quadrant, refuses to consider our proposal . . ." Inak leaned forward. "But if I can show the Great Statesman of Momus that not accepting our proposal would bring disaster to his people . . . do you get my meaning?"

"I will do my best, Inak—"

"No, Shart! You will succeed!" The image faded and the screen went blank.

Shart placed the thumb of his right hand against the tip of his nose and wiggled the remaining six fingers in the direction of the screen. "Yaaaaaaaah!" He dropped his hand and half turned away when the automatic sensor alarm began to buzz. "What now?" He sighed, then switched the function selector on the screen control. Four figures, riding in one of the clumsy Moman lizard carts, were approaching the station. "Not another patient." Shart shook his head, then remembered toying with the idea of training a Moman to handle the multitude of simple tasks around the laboratory that ate up his time. Now that Inak had turned down his latest request for an assistant, and had stepped up the timetable, what choice had he?

Shart deenergized his screen, then turned and entered a corridor leading to the side of the compound facing the road. At the end of the corridor, he opened the door and stepped outside. Immediately, his sense of hearing was assaulted by screams and growls. He narrowed his eyes and examined the travelers. In the rear of the cart, one of the local wild men nodded approvingly while a large man in yellow and green stripes and a short, fat man in purple screamed and growled at each other. Off to one side, a quiet old man, also in purple, seemed to be nodding off. Shart rubbed his hands together. "Excellent!"

The cart pulled to a stop in front of the doctor, and the huge lizard that provided the vehicle's motive power sat down and held



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out its right front foot, palm up. "Anow here. Payup."

The wild man jumped from the cart, then caught a sack thrown to him by the large man in green and yellow. The sack was handed to the lizard, and Shart watched as the lizard reached into the sack and began stuffing fat cobit roots into its mouth. The wild man kicked the lizard. "Look, you wait. Understand?"

The lizard nodded without looking up from the sack. "'Stand."

The wild man walked around the lizard and came to a stop in front of the Vorilian. "Doctor? I understand that you will treat patients for a fee."

Shart looked from the wild man to the pair screaming and growling in the cart, then back to the wild man. "What seems to be their trouble?"

The wild man looked confused, then he laughed. "There is nothing wrong with them, Doctor. They practice their acts. Your patient is the old one. His name is Pulsit. The two in the back are Durki and Raster, and I am Azongo of the Mbwebwe wild men, also hetman of that village."

Shart frowned, then nodded. "What is the old one's trouble?"

Azongo whirled a finger next to his head. "He sees things."

Shart waved a hand at the cart. "Bring him down from there, and let me look at him."

Azongo held up a hand. "One moment, doctor. What is your charge? We were told by the villagers at the base of the plateau that you desire plants and animals."

Shart shrugged. "I have no need of such things now. But I will look at him all the same."

Azongo frowned. "You mean you will treat him for *nothing*?"

Shart remembered that, in the curious reaches of the Moman mind, a service not charged for is worthless. If he charged nothing, he would lose his patient—and, possibly, his head. "Of course not. I must have money—those little copper things."

"How many?"

Shart rubbed his narrow chin. "Twenty-five."

On the cart, the one called Durki reached into the old one's robe and withdrew a small sack. He turned to Azongo. "Pulsit has only twenty-three coppers on him."

Shart nodded. "That will do."

Azongo backed up and rubbed his own chin. "Well, doctor, what *is* your price? I expect such haggling in the market, but from a doctor, I expect a firm price for a specific service."

Shart sighed. "Of course. My price is twenty-five, but surely be-



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tween the three of you, another two coppers can be produced."

Azongo shook his head. "Buying roots for the lizard cleaned us out. Can Pulsit owe you the remaining two coppers?"

"Of course."

"At what rate of interest?"

"N-n-n . . ." Shart stopped himself from saying "none."

"What was that, Doctor?"

"Nine."

"Nine! Nine percent!" Azongo pulled on his lower lip, then shrugged. "Very well." The wild man motioned to the others in the cart. "Lower him down."

Shart and the wild man steadied Pulsit as he came down, and immediately the doctor began examining Pulsit's head. Well above the old man's hairline, he found a large, dark bruise. Azongo folded his arms. "How long will it take? Should we wait?"

"No. It will take some time. You and your friends go back. I'll send him along when he is well."

Azongo shook his head. "How will he pay for the return trip?"

Shart's black eyes bugged. "By the spirits!" He turned toward Azongo. "By then he will be well enough to negotiate his own loan!"

The wild man nodded and held out his hand. "Here."

"What's that?"

"Your coppers."

Shart held out his hand, took the coppers and watched while the wild man climbed back up into the cart, picked up a plank, and swatted the lizard. "On to Mbwebwe!"

The lizard lifted an eyebrow, checked the sack to make sure it was empty, then tossed it aside and began moving the cart around. As the cart pulled out of sight, Shart threw the twenty-three coppers into the grass, then led the old man into the corridor.

Pulsit awakened and found himself in a small room containing only a cot and a small table cluttered with medical-looking things. Images of pirates, cannibals, and dragons flashed through his mind, but he could distinguish them from the world of fact. He assigned the images to his story mill, sighed at his new feeling of well-being, then swung his legs to the floor and sat up.

"Ah! I see you are awake."

Pulsit's eyes widened as he looked around at the empty room. *The ghost of Harvey Marpole leered at the new victim, seated*



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*helpless, alone—trapped. Cold, rotting, unseen hands reached for William's throat. Fingers of ice closed around vessels of pulsing blood, stemming their flow; they pressed against the path that air must take to feed William's lungs—ending it. . . .*

Pulsit jumped as the door opened and Doctor Shart entered. "It is good that you are better. Come, we have much work to do."

Pulsit frowned. "Eh?"

Shart pushed seven-fingered hands into the pockets of his lab coat and looked down his pointed nose at the Moman. "It is my fee for making you well. You are to work for me."

"Work for you? I agreed to this?"

"Yes."

The storyteller frowned, then nodded. "Well, if I agreed . . . " He looked up at the Vorilian. "What kind of work is it?"

Shart pulled a hand from his pocket and motioned toward the door. "Come."

After being-brought to the laboratory, Pulsit was introduced to his tasks, which consisted of operating the automatic glassware cleanser, changing and cleaning the complex's air filters, monitoring the vector-escape alarm system, laundry, and assorted tasks from filing to emptying the trash. Pulsit observed, listened, then nodded at the Vorilian. "Doctor, I can see that you are a great scientist with many important responsibilities. How is it that you have no assistants to perform these insignificant tasks?"

Shart shook his head, then nodded. "Even a Moman can understand, where the Warlords do not." The Vorilian sighed. "You must understand, Pulsit, that no one is more loyal to the Warlords of the Tenth Quadrant than I. But . . ." Shart shrugged, then held out his hands to indicate his laboratory. "This is the work of a lifetime—a lifetime of too-little-appreciated struggle and privation." The Vorilian walked to a rack of clear tubes that towered from the floor to the overhead. The tubes were coiled with dark wires and were filled with a pink, cloudy vapor. "Do you know what this is?"

Pulsit walked to the rack, stopped next to it, and shook his head. "I know not, Doctor."

Shart placed a hand on one of the braces supporting the tubes, and caressed it as he answered. "This . . . this is the work of thirty years—much of it financed out of my own meager resources. No one had my insight—my *vision*! As only a mere student at the Vorilian Academy of Total Warfare, I formed the



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theories that made all this possible." Shart made two fists and shook them. "But it took all these years to acquire for my effort the limited attention I now have. This station and myself for an assistant!"

Pulsit frowned and nodded. "Excellent."

Shart raised his brows. "Excellent?"

"I mean, your life—its circumstances—make excellent material for a storyteller."

"A what?"

Pulsit bowed. "I am Pulsit of the Sina storytellers." The old man stood up and rubbed his bearded chin. "I also do biographies." The storyteller held out a hand toward the rack. "What is this? To do your life and play it before the crowds on Momus, I should be familiar with your work."

Shart smiled, exposing his triple rows of pointed teeth. "My life?"

"Certainly. The lives of great heroes are very popular. Your struggle, your achievement—these are the things of heroics."

Shart looked at the rack, then placed a hand on his cheek. "That's true, old Moman. A hero. Yes, that *is* true!" The Vorilian held out his hands toward the rack. "This is my work—a virus that causes no harm to lifeforms, but it makes them sensitive to radio signals. Each tube carries a different strain of the virus, each one for the infection of a different lifeform." Shart rubbed his hands together. "Once a lifeform is infected I can control it—make it do what I want, or go anywhere I choose. And, once a lifeform is infected, it will spread the virus among others of its kind. By directing the movements of just a few infected creatures, in time I will be able to control all the lifeforms on this planet—with the exception of the humans."

Pulsit raised his brows. "Quite an accomplishment! Indeed, yes. Quite an accomplishment. But what could you do with such a power?"

Shart held out his hands. "If one controls the animal life on a planet, one controls the planet. Plagues can be directed to any part of the globe's surface, and ecological balances disrupted, causing crop failures; great masses of predatory creatures can be used as an army to lay waste vast populations—just think of the weapon it would make!"

Pulsit nodded. "It would have even more uses of a peaceful nature, Doctor."

Shart shrugged. "Yes, I suppose so, but the Warlords are in-



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terested in my work only as a weapon. Still, its success as a weapon will make my name. Then, perhaps, it can be incorporated into plans of a peaceful nature."

Pulsit held out his hands. "Doctor, as important and impressive as this work is, why do you not have at least one assistant?"

"Hah! The Warlords have no idea of the complications. This is why my work does not include the control of humans—the complications are too vast to untangle by myself. Each strain of the virus must be suited to each lifeform, which is difficult even for the simple creatures. My experiments take time, and the Warlords want results now." Shart shook his head. "They are skeptical of my work, and plan to cut off my funds if I can't show them . . . well, you understand."

Pulsit nodded. "Doctor Shart, I would like to tell the story of your life to the people along the roadside fires. To do this, I must know all about you."

Shart rubbed his hands together. "No one knows more than I that my story needs telling, Pulsit, but there is so much to do, and the Warlords—"

"Tut, tut, Doctor. These few tasks I am to do to work off my debt will not take up all of my time. I can work on your biography in my spare time."

Shart nodded, then grinned. "I have kept a daily journal since the Academy, and I have my old yearbooks—would they be of any assistance?"

Pulsit clapped his hands together. "Wonderful! Do you have them here?"

"Yes. One moment, and I'll get them." Shart turned and all but ran from the laboratory.

Pulsit walked once around the lab, his mind trying out bits and snatches of narrative. *Almost from his first day, the young Shart knew he was destined for greatness. What the brilliant Vorilian scientist did not know was how he would have to fight, claw, and struggle to achieve his due. . . .* Pulsit nodded as he decided that the bio would find many willing listeners at the fires. "It will definitely play."

Pulsit stopped before a bank of dials, readouts, meters, and switches. The console had a swept panel that enabled an operator seated before it to reach and see all the controls easily. Mounted above the console was a large screen. "Hmmm." Pulsit stepped before the chair and lowered himself to the seat. *Captain Nova seated himself before the ship's controls, set his square-cut jaw, then*



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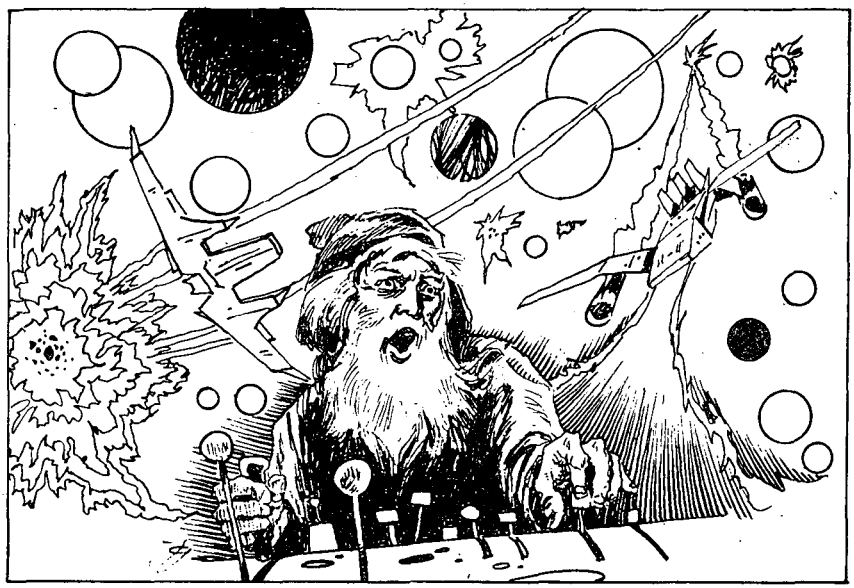

*placed a thick-knuckled hand on the override switches to the ship's reactors. He waited until the enemy formation swung, presenting its side to his ship; then he jammed the switches, throwing power to his engines. "Now you'll see this possum come to life!" His hand flew among the controls, turning dials, flicking switches, forcing the ship to seek and destroy the enemy ships. Smoke filled the cockpit, and Captain Nova saw, almost too late, the enemy ship that had opened fire on him. Flicking another row of switches, Nova launched a salvo of torpedoes at the enemy, held his breath, then laughed as the rogue ship-vaporized. . . .*

"Wha . . . What are you doing?"

Pulsit turned to see Shart standing in a doorway with his arms loaded with books. The Vorilian was looking around at the laboratory, which Pulsit noticed was filled with a grey-yellow haze of smoke. The storyteller turned back to the console, then removed his fingers from it as though they had been burned. "I apologize, Doctor. I must have been carried away with a new kind of story I was thinking—"

Shart dropped the journals and yearbooks with a crash. "You . . . you tripped the vector purge!" He dashed to the rack of tubes. The vapor inside was no longer pink; it was now grey.



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Shart shook his head, placed a hand on the rack brace, then leaned his weight against it. "The work of thirty years . . . gone. All gone."

Pulsit stood, walked over to the rack and placed a gentle hand upon Shart's shoulder. "I am very sorry, Doctor. Had I the coppers, I would lay a handsome apology in your hand."

" . . . gone. All gone."

"But, Doctor," Pulsit rubbed his hands together, then slapped Shart's back, "just think how this will help your biography."

Shart looked at Pulsit, a dazed expression on his face. "Help?"

"Indeed!" Pulsit held out his hands. "So close to success, only to have victory snatched from you. The determined scientist, however, is not defeated. He gathers himself together and begins again the task." Pulsit patted the Vorilian on the back. "It does much to strengthen the hero's character, don't you think?"

Shart pushed himself away from the rack, stared at Pulsit with ever widening eyes, then began patting his pockets. "My gun! Where is it? Where's my gun?"

Pulsit looked around the laboratory. "I don't know, Doctor. Where did you have it last?" The storyteller turned and began looking in the vicinity of the swept control console. "When we have a spare moment, Doctor, I have a new kind of story I'd like to discuss with you. As a scientist, your opinion would be very useful." Pulsit took a last look, shrugged, then turned around. "I don't see your gun over here, Doc. . ." The old man saw Shart, gun in hand, taking aim between the storyteller's eyes.

"All gone. All my work—*gone*!"

Pulsit held up his hands. "Now, Doctor . . ."

Shart fired, but anger shook the hand that held the gun, causing the weapon to ignite the magnesium front panel on the control console. The thick white smoke, intense heat, and blinding light—more than the gun—caused Pulsit to pull up his robe and head for the nearest door. "I'll *kill* you, you old maniac!"

Pulsed beams deflected off the walls and deck as the old storyteller sped through the door, then closed it behind him. Pulsit leaned against the door, took several deep breaths, then noticed that he was in one of the animal compounds. Through the door, he heard Shart crashing in his direction. The old man pushed himself away from the door, then ran for the fence. Squawks, hisses, and growls resounded as feathered, furred, and scaled creatures ran to get out of his way. The fence around the compound was double his own height, and he knew he could never



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climb it. He heard snoring, looked in the direction of the sound, and saw one of the great lizards of Arcadia sleeping next to the fence. He ran over to it, stopped and kicked the huge lizard in the shoulder. "Wake up!"

The lizard opened one slitted eye and observed the human. "Uf?"

More squawks and growls told Pulsit that Shark was close on his heels. "Quick. Lift me over the fence."

The lizard sat up. " 'Ow much?"

"Two sacks of roots, and another of tung berry cakes."

The lizard smiled and held out his palm. "Payup."

Pulsit looked around the lizard's shoulder and saw Shart dashing around the compound, weapon in hand. He pointed at the Vorilian. "He'll pay for both of us."

The lizard nodded, grabbed Pulsit by the back of his robe, and hoisted him over the fence. The storyteller's feet were running before they touched the ground.

The lizard turned and looked back into the compound at Shart. "Doc'or." Shart looked at the lizard, then looked to where the reptile was pointing. Through the fence he could see Pulsit running down the road. He turned to head toward a gate, but stopped short as a great green foot grabbed his shoulder.

"Wawk! What are you doing? Let me go!"

The lizard shook its head. "You payup. Two sack roots, sack tungarry hake."

Pulsit came to a turn in the road, slowed, then stopped. "This . . . too much . . . old man." He saw a rock, sat down and took several deep breaths. When his vision cleared, Pulsit looked back toward the station. The lizard had Shart by both ankles and was shaking the Vorilian. He could barely make out the lizard demanding "You payup! Payup!"

The storyteller nodded. "As well he should, too!" Still puffing, Pulsit pushed himself to his feet and began the long trek back to Mbwebwe.

Four days later, Pulsit sat at Azongo's table, waiting for his companions' reaction to his tale. Raster shook his head. "The doctor doesn't seemed to have helped much."

Azongo nodded. "Pulsit, I don't know if you'll ever chase the devils from your mind."

Pulsit frowned, then held up his hands. "Wait! I am not seeing things—"



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"Oh!" Raster smiled, then laughed. "Then, it was a fine story, Pulsit. A fine story."

Azongo nodded. "It is good that you are well." The wild man shrugged. "But, as a story. . ." He shook his head.

Pulsit turned toward Durki. "What do you think?"

Durki grimaced, then shook his head. "It was a terrible story, Pulsit. Just terrible!"

The old storyteller's eyebrows went up a notch. "And, just what is so terrible about it?"

The apprentice shook his head. "Such a tale; it's awful. First, it's too . . . technical—all those knobs, tubes, coils, and such. Then, a being from another planet! That's story fare for the likes of Raster."

Pulsit frowned. "Doctor Shart *is* from another planet!"

Durki shook his head. "Which still doesn't make it a story worth telling." Durki clasped his hands together and spoke as though he were a master lecturing a none-too-bright apprentice. "The people only want to hear the classic tales; the circus, fights between white and black magic, great fortunetellers solving mysteries. This kind of stuff—this technical fantasy story—will never be popular."

Pulsit rubbed his chin, then shrugged. "Nevertheless, Durki, this is the story I shall tell when we get back to the fires."

Durki looked down. "Then that decides me, Pulsit."

"In what?"

"My screaming and growling are coming along so well that Raster and Azongo have asked me to join their act. Azongo will be the wild man, Raster the hero, and I shall be the victim."

Pulsit thought a moment, then nodded. "I suppose you are all ready to head back to Sina."

Durki shrugged. "I have had enough adventure, and we are anxious to take our act on the road. Will you devise a story for our act?"

Pulsit nodded. "Certainly."

"How much?"

Pulsit stood, walked to the door, and turned back. "We can discuss that later. I would be alone for a while."

Raster stood. "Pulsit?"

"Yes?"

"I thought it was a fine story."

Pulsit nodded. "Thank you."

"Even though you had no pretty girls in it. Perhaps, next time,



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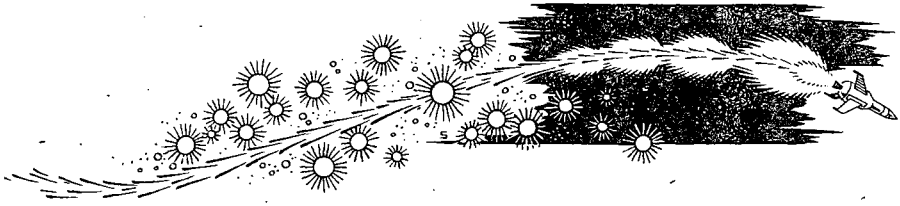
you could add one or two?"

"Perhaps." The old storyteller lifted the door curtain and left.

It is, of course, well known that the new act of Azongo, Raster, and Durki became an overnight success in Tarzak, where it first played the Great Square, and was then commissioned to play the Great Ring as part of the circus there.

Less known is the old storyteller who brought a new kind of tale to the fires along the road from Kuumic to Tarzak. He spoke his tales of space, strange beings, and high adventure, and all listened in wonder. Few appreciated his tales at the beginning, but soon a following began to grow—small, but enough to keep the old fellow in coppers. It is said that he told his stories as though he actually lived them, but little heed should be paid to such things, for that is only part of the storyteller's art. And Pulsit of the Sina storytellers was an artist.





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Dear Mr. Scithers:

This is coming just a bit late, but please accept my very deep thanks for Jack Williamson's article "Will Academe Kill Science Fiction" in the March-April 1978 issue. Williamson has provided an air clearing—from *within* the field—long awaited. The benefits to science fiction and academe alike are vested in the increased level of understanding by each of the other. The two sectors—those who write the works and those who deal with them in literature—have spent far too much time protecting their respective sacred worlds from each other.

As the teacher of two separate courses, "Science Fiction" and "Modern Fantasy" in a small community college (10,000 students) in southern California, I have had the pleasure to observe at least three exciting outcomes of these courses:

1. Students who had previously read much science fiction learned to discover the art and substance they had been missing because they'd not yet learned to be more open to those aspects. They had been passive readers and become active.

2. Students who knew virtually nothing about literature, by using their love of science fiction and/or fantasy, discovered the pleasures of closer reading.

3. Students who knew literature fairly well (whatever *that* means) and who took either of the courses out of curiosity, learned to appreciate and sometimes love a literature they had theretofore disdained.

A few words regarding criticism. The near paranoia of *some* writers concerning criticism very probably stems from the summary relegation of science fiction by *some* paranoids in academe to the lowest levels of all written endeavors. However, once we all can agree (an admitted improbability) that criticism can lead as easily to esteem as to condemnation, the friction between all sectors should lessen appreciably.

Jack Williamson has done us *all* a service. Thanks to him, to you, to the good doctor, and to an outstanding magazine.

Sincerely,

Gene Clarke
Professor of English
Chula Vista CA



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*My own suspicion, Gene, is that all writers are wary of all critics even when it is clear that criticism is constructive. Surgery may be necessary and life-saving but what patient looks forward to the prospect with pleasure?*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear George,

I do have some gripes about your magazine. The biggest one was taken care of when you went monthly. Two months was just too long to wait for the goodies. I like the cover credits on the table of contents page, but if the cover is an illustration of one of the stories could you state which one? I sometimes have a hell of a time trying to figure out which story (if any) the cover is supposed to be with. After all, you are not editing a mystery magazine, it's supposed to be science fiction. [I agree. Joel Davis] [See new format for listing cover art in this issue. GHS]

If you would put a picture of the artist with the articles you have about them I might read it. The way they are now I don't even bother.

I enjoy the short stories with the plays on words. I have always appreciated a punny story. (Wasn't that terrible? I love it.)

I very much doubt what Dr. Asimov says about his age. My great grandfather admits that he is middle aged and he said the good doctor looks too young to be in his late youth.

Thanks,

Paul J. Hawkins
Tacoma WA

*Okay on the cover-story credits. Let's do it, George.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Congratulations on two years of successful publication. I expect to see many more.

One of the many reasons that has brought *IA'sfm* to the top of my list of favorite magazines is its responsiveness to the readers. I had long ago forsaken any hope of ridding my collection of science fiction books of those pesky cigarette ad inserts (every time you rip one out, the book self-destructs). Imagine my surprise at Mr. Davis' announcement that he had decided, due to reader re-



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sponse, to eliminate them. Totally unheard of!!! What publisher ever voluntarily gives up a guaranteed source of income just because a few readers complain? Especially since the quality of the magazine more than compensates for the inconvenience of the ads.

Even better than that was the announcement that the magazine would be sent in wrappers. I had just mailed my check for a subscription when I read the letter that complained about the mailing labels stuck on the cover. I decided then and there not to renew my subscription. I am happy to announce that I have changed my mind. In fact, I am impressed with the speed that these changes were implemented. [Alas, mechanical problems made it impossible to continue the wrappers. GHS]

Keep up the good work.

Please send me the list of editorial requirements for story submissions. A self-addressed, stamped envelope is enclosed. [Done! GHS]

Sincerely,

Kerry D. Bishop
Salt Lake City UT

*Our readers aren't just readers, Kerry. We have a very close-knit brotherhood in science fiction, and we listen to the family. If we sometimes seem unresponsive, it may be because some things can't be done without going out of business.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers,

In my last letter, I raved about Barry B. Longyear's "The Tryouts" in the November-December issue of *IA'sfm*. So what happens? I find another story by Mr. Longyear in the following issue (I'm speaking of "The Second Law," of course).

Barry B. Longyear is the (in my opinion) best new writer to be published this year. Longyear's characters are real; they are interesting and sensitive; they face the future as best they can; and because of this, Longyear's characters are given the illusion of permanence in the reader's mind. Like I've said in letters past, the man writes stories that kiss the soul!

Now, I have just one question: Is there any way that sometime in the (near) future *IA'sfm* might do an all Barry B. issue? If there is, DO IT! I beg you, do it.



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As to stories in issue 11: "The Second Law" (of course) took first place; "Garbage," "In the Country of the Blind, No One Can See," and "The Castaways" tied for second place; "On the Road to Science Fiction: From Wells to Heinlein" ran third; everything else was pretty good, but "Ker-plop" by Ted Reynolds—well, maybe next time.

By the way, I'm glad the magazine went monthly. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely yours,

Joseph E. May, Jr.
Sanford FL

*An all-Longyear issue might be stretching it a bit, but George and I agree with you in your estimate of him.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I loved the November-December issue's cover, with its attractive contrast between fiery orange and a cool blue, illustrating Barr's strength in painting. I do *not* love, however, the somewhat sloppy insertion of your picture in the "o" of "Asimov's"; it looks as if you're slowly sinking into nowhere and detracts from the overall impact of the cover. To give readers an impression of the true care you obviously take with the rest of the magazine, I suggest you either discontinue your portrait (!) or, if you must, at least handle it with the precision apparent of the Winter '77 and January-February '78 cover portraits. An *almost* insignificant fault, this, but someone had to bring it to your attention.

. . . Now, Dr. Asimov, while I really do enjoy most of the stories in *IA'sfm,* and your not-surprisingly fascinating editorials, and recently the articles on Freas, Whelan, and Barr, I feel that even all these, combined, cannot compensate for the absence of Asimov stories suffered by *four* issues in a row! And the eight-year-old short-short "As Chemist to Chemist" does very little to rectify the situation.

To Mr. Scithers: congratulations! You most assuredly deserve the Hugo and will undoubtably win several more in the years to come. If you don't die of exhaustion first, that is.

Sincerely,

Thomas M. Miller
Martinsville NJ



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*Let's be serious for a moment. Is it fair for me to write too often? My stories occupy space that could be filled by new young writers and is it not they who are the hope of the future in our field?*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I'm going to momentarily step out of my role as a would-be contributor to *IA'sfm* to that of a reader. Your magazine has one glaring deficiency. The letters to the editor just don't measure up to say, *Analog*. I'm sure you pick the best you get, but *IA'sfm* would be improved by some of the fascinating debates that occur in the columns there. Your otherwise excellent magazine would be better if you could convince your readers to write their interesting letters to you, rather than elsewhere.

Sincerely,

Teresa McCullough
6052 Stevens Forest Rd.
Columbia MD

*Alas, debates only fascinate those they fascinate. We get many epistolary sighs of relief at their absence. We are not, however, bigoted. We will include debates when they seem interesting, but we will not overload.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Thanks very much for the manuscript format you sent me. You will be getting a story as soon as I manage to wrestle one through my typewriter. Don't say you didn't get fair warning.

I've finished both the September-October and November-December '78 issues of *IA'sfm* and I compliment you on your ability to consistently put out some very enjoyable reading. It's good to see something a little different once in awhile, such as pieces like "Errata Slip." Also, keep printing those horrible puns. (And I say that even though I firmly believe that Ferdinand Feghoot should be shot on sight.)

I also hope you will continue your series of articles on science fiction illustrators. As a beginning artist who hopes to do some illustrating someday myself, it's interesting to read about the people who have made it, and encouraging to read success stories



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as well.

There is one specific article I would like to comment on, and that is "On Man's Rôle in the Galaxy" by R. N. Bracewell, in the September-October issue. In this article, Bracewell states that the reason no human level intelligence developed independently in the New World is that "the early models of primitive man originating in Africa were able to walk all over the earth, except for Antarctica, and preëmpt further natural evolution of independent intelligent species elsewhere." In fact, there is no evidence that any hominids of any kind existed in the New World prior to the arrival of fully developed Homo *sapiens* (the ancestors of the American Indians) 30 or so thousand years ago. Possible reasons why early hominids didn't get here are that a land bridge across what is now the Bering Strait was not present at the right time, or that *Australopithecines,* et al. were neither genetically nor technologically adapted to cold climates, and the land bridge is only open during an ice age. (And if they *were* here, why didn't *they* evolve into an intelligent New World species?)

So, some bear-like or raccoon-like animal, or more likely one of the New World monkeys, did have millions of years to independently evolve into a highly intelligent species without any hominid interference. The fact that they did not suggests that the conditions under which a high level of intelligence will develop are relatively specific. Although, now that I think about it, the events occurring on only one planet did not make a very good statistical sample.

The above is just a small point in an otherwise interesting and thought provoking article, but it is an obvious error. (At least to me it is. I suppose not everyone has a B.A. in Anthropology.)

As I said at the beginning of this letter, you folks do nice work. Keep it up.

Sincerely,

David Cederstrom
Oneonta NY

*Quite. Also Australia, come to think of it, into which Homo sapiens entered as the first hominid about thirty thousand years ago. But had this not happened, intelligent species of non-hominid origin might have evolved eventually in these areas—given millions of years.*

*—Isaac Asimov*



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Dear Dr. Asimov,

Congratulations, the first on picking two fine magazines to which to lend your illustrious name. Mr. Scithers is doing one hell of a job. One question: The several magazines to which I subscribe often seem to have related stories among them for the month's issues. One month there were vampire stories in two mags; another month there were stories on computer war-gaming. Is there a topic of the month among editors?

Congratulations the second, albeit a little tardy, on your article "Just Mooning Around" in which you suggested that humanity would be initially amazed to find that half the large planets in the universe had rings. The announced discovery of Uranus' rings made me feel proud of you.

On a less congratulatory note, I must take exception to your use of the word "unanimously" in the description of your pen pal mentioned in the November-December editorial. I just can't force my "American Heritage" definition to make one person "unanimously wrong." Please enlighten me.

As for critical assessment from me, no way. I read solely for the enjoyment of it, and trust editors to make it worthwhile.

Yours,

Carl W. Huber, Jr.
York PA

*I think we have to count on the long arm of coincidence. Editors (or, anyway, George) are far too frank and ingenuous to indulge in conspiracies.—And drop that dictionary. The inappropriate adjective used to induce a smile is as old as Mark Twain.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Howdy (from the Great Southwest)

Discovered *IA'sfm* sitting on the shelf of a Sundry Shop in Virginia last July. Now this did not seem a fitting home for it so I immediately gave it a new residence. Being a member of Dr. Asimov's crazy (Mensa) society, I, naturally, buy anything with his name on it and am very seldom disappointed. This time was no exception. As a former humor columnist for a daily rag, I especially enjoy the pieces with an unexpected punchline. Keep up the good work!



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Since I don't like to work, I support myself by combining two areas of science (Aeronautics and Agriculture) into a pleasurable endeavor calculated to support me in a manner to which I am not accustomed, but would like to be. I fly an Agricultural Airplane (crop-duster to the uninformed, though very little dust is applied to crops now). Who wants to work for a living when they can fly? However, this leaves me with time (a lot of it), on my hands during four or five winter months.

I have not done any serious writing in the last six or seven years (some say I've never done any serious writing), but when I am not flying I keep coming up with ideas to put on paper. If you would be so kind as to send me your manuscript information, I will submit one or two and see what you think of them. [Done! GHS]

Even if *IA'sfm* wasn't such a top quality magazine, the service you provide by actively soliciting new writers would justify publication. The fact that the stories are so enjoyable is icing on the cake.

Keep it up

Gene Mires
Hooker OK

*It always makes me nervous to have people place absolute reliance on my name as a measure of quality, but I think Joel shrewdly counted on that.*

*—Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Scithers,

Just a short note to thank you for running John Carr's notice about the SFWA in the November-December issue. [The notice said anyone may subscribe to the *SFWA Bulletin* at $8.00 for 4 issues from John F. Carr, 10512 Yarmouth Ave., Granada Hills, CA 91344.] But the address to write to for information about joining the Science Fiction Writers of America has been changed to:

Michael D. Toman
Box 381
East Lansing MI 48823

While it's always a pleasure to talk to Joan and pick up letters



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from new writers, she's just passed page 500 of her big new vampire novel and the bats around Shiawassee St. are getting kind of obstreperous. The above address should be good until they stop spinning the barrel and I can find my way *out* of here. (And thanks for mentioning that an SASE would be appreciated.)

Sincerely,

Michael D. Toman
for the Membership
Committee
Box 381
East Lansing MI 48823

*As always, we encourage your letters. They are read by the editor; by the editorial director, Dr. Asimov; and by the publisher, Mr. Davis. We're interested in what you like about the magazine, in what you think we're not doing that we should do, and in what we're doing that you think we shouldn't. Newsstand distribution is always of concern; although we do not print all the letters we get on this (or any other) subject, information on how well we're distributed gets very careful attention in the newsstand circulation department, and when necessary our Newsstand Circulation Director passes the information from your letters on to our national distributor, Curtis Circulation Company and through the distributor to the local magazine wholesalers.*

*Letters to the editor (and the rest of us) should be addressed to the magazine at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101. Letters on subscription matters (and don't forget to give us a timely change of address when you move!) go to an entirely different address: Box 1855 GPO, New York NY 10001.*

*—George H. Scithers*

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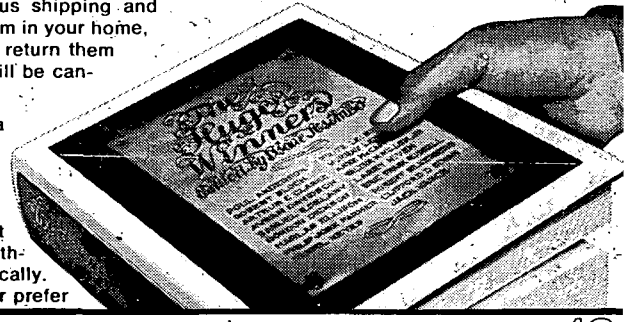


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